

## Stories of the Master

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### SM014 – Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?

Jesus was by the Sea of Galilee. It was one of his favorite places, the shore on this large, beautiful lake that was the site of so many miracles and so many lessons. But it was hard to remain unnoticed and soon a large crowd had gathered and Jesus was teaching them.

Jesus was pleased that so many gathered to listen. But often, among the crowd, he would single out one person. Crowds sometimes fed on the excitement of crowds, and many never learned why they were gathering. Jesus wanted to touch the lives of all, but he could touch them only if their hearts were right and they were truly seeking God.

On this day, Jesus would touch the life of one man who would forever be changed. It was not a miracle Jesus would do for him. It was that Jesus would come to his home. His name was Matthew-Levi, and he was a tax collector.

Tax collecting was a risky business in the ancient world. The Romans required such men to pay taxes up front, and then the collectors would be released to go into a district to collect the taxes from the people. Some tax collectors would barely be able to make a living, especially the ones who were honest. But some were wealthy and because of their wealth the people would suspect dishonesty and despise them. Such a system invited abuse and harshness in dealing with people and merchants.

Tax collectors collected money on all goods entering or leaving their district or upon goods being transported across the district. They would set up their custom houses or tax collecting booths at gates, bridges, or landings by the large bodies of water. Tradesmen, craftsmen, and even prostitutes paid taxes on their goods and services, and tradesmen especially would have conflict with the tax collectors because of their goods constantly being transported from one part of the land to another. It seemed one could not move without the sharp eyes of tax collectors upon them.

This was a world of injustice, a world where most struggled to survive, and a world where the few prospered upon the backs of the disadvantaged many. But it was also a world that Jesus had come to heal and his message of the kingdom of God was a message for all – for the wretched and the rich, for the powerful and the poor.

As he sat in his toll booth, Matthew could hear the words of Jesus. His words touched his heart. He edged away from the security of his official seat that he might draw closer. He had never heard any man speak like this.

“The kingdom of God comes to heal all people – the poor and the rich, the powerful and the weak. The prophets long ago prophesied about these days which you now see and hear. The kingdom of God has come to make the crooked straight, to turn mountains into plains and to lift up the valleys of human suffering. Some suffer in their bodies. Their hardship is open to the eyes of all. Some suffer in their hearts – even the wealthy – and their hearts cry out for the hand of God to heal them of their sickness of spirit.”

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Matthew cast down his eyes and thought on what Jesus was saying, “Yes, sickness of spirit, that is what I have.” And as he thought on his condition, he did not notice that Jesus was looking in his direction and watching. Jesus was reading his face and his heart and Jesus knew that this man was longing for the touch of God.

The teaching ended. Jesus dismissed the crowds and Matthew went back to his tax collecting booth. He was quieter now and as the people filed by to pay taxes, he was not as demanding. He seemed deep in thought. He had heard all his life about the coming of the kingdom of God, but his collecting money from his people to pay Herod or the Romans seemed a million miles from what God had promised. And what did this Jesus have to do with the kingdom? Could he be the one to set people free? If only he could talk to Jesus, maybe he would guide him through the conflict he felt in his heart. But would Jesus even want to spend time with him? So many looked down upon him and his profession.

Matthew was still deep in his thoughts when someone approached. He was putting some coins into a bag and said, “What goods do you have to declare,” but when he looked up he was surprised to be looking into the face of Jesus who said, “Only God’s love for you, Matthew. But I don’t think the governments of the world have figured out a way to tax that, at least not yet!” Jesus laughed, Matthew did not know what to say and then Jesus said, “Matthew, I have seen you. I have watched you. Come, walk with me. We have much to talk about.”

Again, Matthew was speechless. Jesus had taken a few steps, he turned back toward Matthew, extended his hand and with a smile and a nod of his head said, “Yes, come. Follow me.”

Matthew turned to his associate and said, “You’re now in charge,” and he left everything that was his in his tax collecting booth and followed Jesus.

They walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and Jesus said, “You have some questions for me Matthew, I believe.” “Yes, I do, teacher,” and Matthew asked all the questions that were on his heart, and Jesus answered. Matthew asked about the kingdom of God, about the stories he had heard since childhood and the promises of the prophets. When will these things be? How could these things be? With the Romans and the family of Herod firmly in charge, the kingdom of God seemed as remote as the stars of the heavens.

But there was something more troubling than the politics of the day. “Matthew,” Jesus said, “Matthew, I know that your questions are deeper still. Why not ask me what is really on your heart?” And Matthew said,

“Jesus, even if the kingdom of God has, as you say, started to exert its power in the land, what good is that to me? I am involved in a profession that most people despise. Even my fellow countrymen look down upon me for collecting taxes and they often accuse me of dishonesty. Would God receive me? Is there any hope for me to enter God’s kingdom?”

And Jesus replied, “Matthew, did you not hear what I said today. Yes, the kingdom of God has come to restore all things. It has come to heal the sick in body and the sick in heart. It has come to release

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the captives but also to free the captors from their oppressive ways. The kingdom has come for all, for all who will receive it. The kingdom has come to change everything and to make all things new.

As Matthew listened his heart burned with passion and with hope at Jesus' words. Joy filled his heart as the reality of forgiveness and a new start went deep within his soul. Finally, Matthew burst out, "Jesus, I know this is asking a lot, but will you come to my house as my honored guest?"

This was taking a risk. Would such a religious, holy man dare to enter the house of a tax collector? But Matthew couldn't help it – he was so overjoyed with all that Jesus was saying he couldn't contain himself and so he asked Jesus over for dinner.

And Jesus said, "Yes, Matthew, I would be delighted to be the honored guest in your house."

But then Matthew said, "Oh Jesus, there is more. May I ask for another favor?" And with joy in his voice Jesus said, "Matthew, ask and you will receive."

"Jesus, I have many friends who need to hear what you are saying. May I invite them also to my house so they can hear your words?" And Jesus said, "Matthew, invite them all. This is why I have come. The kingdom of God is like a tax collector who finds a reason to bring everyone to his booth! The kingdom of God reaches out to everyone but with love, not a tax, and all it wants is love in return."

Matthew laughed at Jesus' little parable comparing the kingdom to a tax collector. People watched in astonishment as Jesus walked with Matthew along the shore and talked and laughed as if they were good friends. But they would have even a greater surprise when they saw them head into the village and make their way to Matthew's home.

When Matthew and Jesus arrived, Matthew called his servants to his side and said, "Tonight, we are going to have a feast. Tonight we are going to celebrate!"

The head servant said, "Master, what are we celebrating tonight?" And Matthew said, "Tonight, we are celebrating the kingdom of God, and the teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, will be our honored guest!"

The servants immediately set out on all their tasks. Some prepared the banqueting hall, others killed a calf for the meal. Some went to the market to ensure they had all the spices and foods and best wines for the night.

And then Matthew gave instructions to other servants to go to his friends and invite them to the dinner. He wrote notes and sealed the notes with his seal of authority and off the messengers went throughout the village to invite Matthew's friends to the feast, all of them considered sinners and unclean in the eyes of the religious leaders. It would be quite a collection of characters!

To house by house, the messengers went and to person after person the messengers delivered their invitations. Many were tax collectors like Matthew. Some were craftsmen involved in trades that were considered unclean and some were women with a certain reputation, "Your respected associate, Matthew-Levi, is hosting a great feast on this night in his home, and he wishes you to come."

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“Why, what is the occasion?” some would reply. Others said, “Why tonight? What’s going on with Matthew?”

And the servants would answer, “You’ll never guess who’s coming to dinner!”

### Break

One by one the sinners came, and one by one Matthew introduced them to Jesus. They had heard about Jesus, his teaching and his works of power. They had thought Jesus would never have anything to do with them, and some were wary and on guard, but in the safety of the home of their friend Matthew and as the evening wore on, they felt more at ease. One of them said, “Jesus, I heard about the man with the skin disease. I heard that he ran into town, against the law, and yet you healed him.”

Jesus said, “Yes, I did heal him. Yes, it was against the laws of men that he come into the village, but the kingdom of God has come to bring healing and life to all and sometimes the laws of men must bow to the law of God’s love. I also told him not to tell anyone, but it seems that the story has gotten out.”

They all laughed and relaxed a little. Then they talked about the paralyzed man and how his four friends had done the unthinkable.

“Jesus, did they really carry their paralyzed friend to the roof, make a hole in the roof and let him down in it?”

“Yes, they did. It was quite a sight – especially for the owners of the house.” They all laughed again and then Jesus said, “But that didn’t matter. A roof can always be repaired, and people are more important than things. If only all of God’s people would take such initiative. I would heal them all. I would forgive them all. But they will not all come to me. But you are here and Matthew is here.”

The group grew quiet and then it was time for the meal. Matthew came to Jesus and Jesus said, “Matthew, I want this to be a special occasion. I want us to recline at the meal tonight in celebration of God’s goodness to us all and in celebration of His kingdom.”

Jews would normally sit upright in chairs at a table for their meals but on special occasions such as a great festival – like Passover – or a great family celebration they would recline at their meal. There was much to celebrate in Matthew’s house that night, and Jesus wanted to recline with them all for in his reclining he was announcing through this meal that something special was taking place that evening. The kingdom of God was coming to the house of Matthew-Levi and his friends.

Isaiah the prophet said that when God’s kingdom came, God would prepare a lavish banquet for his people. Here is what the prophecy said:

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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<sup>7</sup> And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples,  
Even the veil which is stretched over all nations.

Jesus would often recline at meals with others because he was acting out the great banquet that Isaiah had prophesied so many hundreds of years before. He was proclaiming God's kingdom in the land. He was proclaiming that in his presence and in fellowship with him, people could find the kingdom they had longed for. In him, the veil that had blinded people and families and nations would be removed and people could enter into the presence of God with feasting, joy, and forgiveness because of his grace and goodness.

And so Jesus reclined at the feast with his new disciple Matthew and with Matthew's friends, the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus was loving them, accepting them, forgiving them, and giving them a new start and they were overjoyed at his company.

But then, some people arrived at the party, and started asking some hard questions and threatened to destroy all the good that was taking place in the hearts of Matthew and his friends.

Scribes and Pharisees entered Matthew's house, saw the revelry and asked,

"Why is Jesus eating and drinking with these people? Doesn't he know what kind of people they are? These are tax collectors – a bunch of cheats. And these others are people who don't pay attention to the Law of Moses and carry out his commands. These are the kinds of people who are making it so hard on us. This is why we are cursed. This is why God has withheld his blessing. This is why we are in bondage to the Romans!"

The Pharisees and scribes, and really all Jews took their meals very seriously. Meals were a way of measuring social status. What was true on the outside in society in everyday life was also reflected inside homes and with the rules for eating.

There were important questions that had to be answered when preparing a meal for guests:

- Who eats with whom?
- Who sits where?
- What does one eat?
- Where does one eat?
- Who does what during the meal?
- How is the food prepared?
- What utensils are used?
- When does one eat?
- What talk is appropriate?
- When does one eat what course?

These were important questions and it seemed Jesus was having no regard for any of them. The person one ate with was also making a statement that the ones at dinner shared the same values, the same ideals, and were socially equal! And Jesus was here eating with socially inferior people – with sinners – and seeming to enjoy it!

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All became quiet in the house. The joy was suddenly quenched by this outburst of the religious leaders. All eyes looked to Jesus. What would he do? Would he bend to the pressure the Pharisees were applying? Would he apologize for his behavior and excuse himself from the party?

Jesus sat up. He looked at the Pharisees who were standing outside the circle of those reclining at the meal and he said:

“Those who are healthy don’t need a doctor.” He paused and let his words sink into the ears and the hearts of all who listened. Then he looked at his new friends seated around him and continued.

“I did not come for healthy people. I have come for those who are sick. I did not come for those who are righteous. I came for those who are sinners.”

He turned back to the Pharisees and said, “Go and learn what the prophet meant when he said, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice. I desire compassion, not religious duty.’”

It seemed that Matthew and all his friends had stopped breathing but when Jesus said those words they let out a collective breath of relief and their hearts were with Jesus and his kingdom forever.

The Pharisees continued to stand in the background with grim faces. But the meal continued and soon the conversation was back to where it was with lots of noise and shouting and happiness until another group came into the house. These were disciples of John the Prophet. Remember John? He was the humble prophet. He was the one who baptized Jesus. He was the one who said he was not worthy to loosen the sandals off his feet. And he was the one who encouraged his followers to run after Jesus.

But not all of his followers did. Some stayed with John and while John probably enjoyed their company, the ones who stayed with him were missing the new things happening in the land and the new things that Jesus was doing. They did not hear about the healings. They did not hear about the teaching on the kingdom of God. They did not hear about Jesus feasting with sinners and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Instead, they continued their ascetic style of living and regularly fasted with John and denied themselves many things, thinking that this would bring in the kingdom of God. And when John, their leader was imprisoned by Herod, they continued these practices even as they scattered back to their homes. Some of John’s followers heard that Jesus was in town and they know that John had pointed to Jesus as the One who was to come.

And so with their leader, John, in prison, they sought Jesus out but when they arrived at the house, they were not prepared for what their eyes would see! Instead of a man leading others in prayer, they saw Jesus reclining at table. Instead of a man observing a fast day, they saw Jesus eating a sumptuous meal. Instead of Jesus teaching a disciplined group of followers, they saw Jesus associating with people who had made choices against God. Jesus was so unlike John. John had been so reserved and rigid in his lifestyle, but Jesus seemed loose and carefree by comparison.

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Finally one of them said, “We are John’s disciples. We have been fasting and praying. The Pharisees also have been fasting and praying. But Jesus, why do you and your disciples not fast and pray, as we do? Why are you eating with them at a time such as this in our land?”

Jesus loved John and he must have had a special love in his heart for the followers of John. He turned to them and said:

“When a man marries, his attendants, his friends who are with him don’t fast do they? No, they have a party and as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. To fast would be an insult. But the time comes when the party ends, the bridegroom leaves, and then, if they choose, they can enter into a fast on another day.”

These were familiar words. John himself had compared Jesus to the bridegroom and himself to an attendant at a wedding. John himself had talked about having joy at a wedding and said that his joy was full because Jesus was the bridegroom of the people.

Perhaps they remembered John telling them that before he was arrested. And now here they were with Jesus who was using the same illustration to explain what he was doing. Still, they had difficulty. They were so accustomed to a rigid, harsh life that it was hard for them to conceive of any act of joy such as Jesus was experiencing while the Romans were in charge of the land.

Jesus saw the difficulty they were having with his parable of the bridegroom, and so he said, “Think about a garment. If you have a tear in the garment and you need to patch it, you don’t use brand new material, material that still needs to shrink, to fix the patch. If you do, the new material will shrink and you’ll have another tear worse than the first.”

Jesus said, “Think about wineskins. When you put wine into wineskins, the skins expand. When you have new wine you must use new skins. If you keep putting new wine into old skins the new wine will cause the old skins to keep expanding and eventually they will burst. You will lose the skins and the wine. New wine must be put into new wineskins.”

“I have come with the new wine of the kingdom for all and the old skins of fasting and dinner rules are not sufficient to carry this joyous message that God’s kingdom has come to seek sinners and to call them into a new life.”

And with those words, Jesus turned from them and continued eating with Matthew and his friends.

We don’t know what John’s disciples did after hearing those words. Nor do we know what the Pharisees and scribes did. But we do know what Matthew did.

From that moment, his heart was with Jesus, and Matthew followed him for the rest of his life.