

I think we, I think we know, we know that. What are you doing here? With this kind of people in this kind of place? What are you thinking? It's invited, and it's, it's extended, and it's opened for the sick and the sinners. One of my favorite hymns right there, Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine. This is my story, sing it with me. This is my song, praising my Savior all the day long. This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Savior all the day long.

I'm excited about getting kids back to school. Cleaning up the house in the morning and having it stay that way for at least 6 hours. That's gonna be great. But here at church, we've been going through the last couple of weeks a summer series that we're calling Block Party, and we're looking at the ministry of Jesus, especially the way his ministry so often happens in just informal gatherings. Jesus spent a surprising amount of time in homes and around tables, and some of his most life-changing moments didn't happen in big cities, in the temple, or even in the synagogue. Those life-changing moments happened in living rooms, in courtyards, at dinner parties and neighborhood gatherings.

And the lesson we took away from that is that when we open our homes to others, ordinary spaces, homes can become places where people encounter the healing presence of Jesus. And that matters when we open our homes to Jesus. We talked about it doesn't have to be perfect. Your house is not—we know it's not going to be on the home show unless it's the before. That's all right. If your house is a before, that's all right. We open our before houses to Jesus and others and life change can happen.

Last week we laughed at those crazy friends of the paralyzed man and how audacious it must have been to be in that living room, that house, when the roof opened up and that paralyzed man came down on a mat. And the lesson we took away from that is that our lives can create pathways and tear down barriers to help others find Jesus. We just simply have to show up with them.

And this week we're going to look at a party. We're going to look at a party that Jesus attended where the guest list was probably not from what you might have expected from a party with Jesus. Christians and parties have an uncomfortable relationship. If you grew up in church in the '70s and '80s, you probably know what I mean by this. How many of you guys are with me, old enough to remember churches and their connections to parties in general? I grew up in a church that had big rules. Rules about dancing. Anyone? Amen. Your church had rules about dancing. Movies. Anyone have rules about movies growing up? Music. Anyone had rules about what kind of music was appropriate, inappropriate for Christians? Am I the only one that grew up Pentecostal in this room?

I remember First Baptist and I didn't go to First Baptist, but I heard about it and I'm thinking, Okay, well, maybe. First Baptist offered an alternative to a dance, and they had it in the church basement, and, and the music was guaranteed to be safe, you know, for kids. The punch bowl was safe. The dancing was appropriate and safe. The guest list was curated and safe. And instead of at the really cool place like high school gym, which is super cool, or the local convention center, which is again, wowza. Proms, church dances were usually in the basement of the church or the fellowship hall. And I know this is shocking, but this is church, so we're just gonna be honest here, okay? It wasn't the same. It wasn't the same. And it came from a good place. Nobody wanted their kids drinking spiked punch or being corrupted by Duran Duran or Depeche Mode. No one wanted that.

Party. But instead of seeing a problem, Jesus saw an opportunity. He saw an opportunity to reveal God's heart for people who felt overlooked, unwanted, or far from him. So if you got your Bibles or you got your Bible app, turn to Luke chapter 5, and we're going to look at a party.

Heavenly Father, As we open your word, we pray that you would speak to us, challenge us, encourage us, embolden us to live a life that invites people to know you better. We pray this in your name. Amen.

So the scripture begins, Luke chapter 5, verse 27 through 32. And here's how Luke describes this moment. After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him. And Levi got up and he left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house. And a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'

When I was in high school, my friend groups tended to fall into two, two categories. The, the super religious kids, the kids that showed up to church on Sunday morning, went to youth group on Sunday night, did the Wednesday night thing— those were my one group of friends. And then I had The kids who were up to no good, that circle, you know what I mean? And I'll be honest, if that was a Venn diagram, there was a lot of overlap between those two groups. This will happen.

And these phrases in our culture of just openness and embracing everybody. It may sound really, really narrow-minded, but Scripture does warn us about being wise about our connections and our friends. Psalm 1 says the blessed person doesn't walk in step with the wicked person. Proverbs warns

us not to become companions with angry or foolish people. Friends matter. Paul says bad company corrupts good character. Say that 9 times fast. Bad company corrupts good character. So the Bible is clear, good friends do matter.

But sometimes, in an effort to remain pure and separate and distinct as believers. Religious people— Christians— can build our lives so tightly controlled that we no longer know anyone who needs mercy, and we become a little weird. Have you ever— you know what I'm talking about? We're so separate that we become just weird. Now Levi is not a friend your parents or your grandparents would have approved of, and I don't think it's because he's spiking the punch. It's because he's just not the right kind of people.

Levi is a tax collector, and tax collectors were viewed as collaborators with Rome, the enemy. They were viewed as traitors to their own people. And, and honestly, tax collectors were oftentimes just outright thieves. Here's how you became a tax collector. Rome would actually auction off the right to collect taxes for them, so you would bid on that job like a government contractor. If you're a government contractor, this sermon's not about you, but in this instance Matthew somehow got the bid to be a tax collector. And he would contract with the Roman government to raise a certain amount of money for the government. Matthew would say, "I think I can raise \$2 million." And the government would say, "Bam! You got the job." And they would hire him. They'd give him a booth. They'd give him a badge and a name tag on him, put him behind a desk, and off would go the letters from the IRS. And he would collect the money. Anything he collected above the amount that he contracted with the government to raise was his to keep. That was his wage. And that system practically begged people to overcharge, intimidate, and exploit for their own purposes. Tax collection in Jesus' day was effectively legalized extortion, and everybody hated—tax collectors.

But Levi was noticed by Jesus, and Jesus said to Levi, "Hey, come and hang out with me. I want to be your friend, and I want you to be my friend." He says, "Come and be a disciple. Follow me." And Levi is so overwhelmed by that invitation of Jesus, by that display of mercy, by that kindness, that he goes home and starts planning a party. And he's going to invite all the people he works with, all of his other friends, and he only has friends now in this circle. And so they're going to be tax collectors and what the Pharisees would later describe as sinners. And this is much less like a church dance as it is a mafia wedding with kosher appetizers.

I remember the first time I ever walked into a bar. Woo! Not Applebee's. I mean like a legit bar. Thankfully, I was with a friend who knew bars maybe a little too well and guided me through the process. Here's the deal. I was in a foreign country, but the whole time I was in that bar, I felt like my mom was going to call me, say, hey, what are you up to? I'm like, Uh, hold on just a second. Or my

preacher was going to walk in, or my Sunday school teacher was going to pop her head through the window and start quoting Leviticus through the doorway. They've caught them in the act of being someplace they shouldn't be, and they target the disciples like, like the, like the pride of lions targeting the gazelle. They find the ones with the most fear and anxiety in their eyes, and they, and attack and say, "What are you doing here in this place eating and drinking with these people? What are you doing? What are you thinking?"

Now I'm a weak and cowardly friend, I confess it, and I would probably have just pointed at Jesus and said, "He made me do it. He made me come. No, I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be here." Maybe the disciples did too because Jesus is the one that actually answers the accusation. Jesus answered them and he says, listen, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but I've come to call sinners to repentance.

I have noticed, and maybe you have too, that it's often the people we avoid that Jesus goes looking for. The blind man begging in the corner, yelling at something that no one else can see, a little crazy in the head, and you just walk a wide circle around him. Maybe it's the twisted crippled man sort of shuffling through the crowd. Maybe it's the lonely person at a nursing home that sits and mutters to themselves in the corner. Maybe it's the addict or the thief. Maybe it's a person whose decisions have landed them in hard and shameful places, places that we would not be caught dead unless we're with Jesus. Because Jesus goes into places that religious people avoid.

And why does he do it? He tells us it's because Sick people need a doctor. Lost sheep need a shepherd. Lost coins need to be found. Runaways who are far from home and far from God need to know that they are still loved by a good, good, good Father. And even tax collectors have a redemption arc to their story.

Now, so far we've only heard from Luke. But I want to ask Levi, the guy who's throwing the party, What does Levi think about all of this? Because he's watching and he's also writing it down so we can read it later. And Levi's name, you may know better as Matthew. And in Matthew chapter 9, verse 13, here's what he remembers Jesus saying. He remembers Jesus adding this part right here: But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but I have come to call sinners. Oh man, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. We love sacrifice. I feel really good about myself when I'm making some personal sacrifices. Is anyone noticing how much I'm just sacrificing for the sake of God's call on my life? I love, I love to sacrifice. Sacrifice is honorable. We love sacrifice.

Mercy for the person whose worst day became their forever identity now. Well, welcome to Sherwood Oaks. We're glad you're here. We're kind of wrapping up summer. Those of you who have kids in school, you know what I mean by that, even though the heat of August and September are still in front of us. I get it, but it seems like something is wrapping up in my head at least.

This matters because in a world where loneliness is increasing and genuine relationships can be hard to find, Jesus reminds us that transformation often happens through very simple acts of friendship and hospitality and just being present with people. That matters.

So a couple weeks ago, week 1, we looked at Peter's mother-in-law. You guys were here for that. You remember that her hospitality created opportunities for others to meet Jesus. But the church kids knew exactly where the cool stuff was happening, and it wasn't at the table where the punch bowl was filled with sherbet and 7-Up. Yeah, you know. But by golly, the wrong kids stayed out and the right kids stayed safe. And this is the kind of attitude that we approach when we look at this account from the life of Jesus. All the wrong people showed up at this party.

As I got older and had more freedom to go further and stay out later, my mom would pepper her conversations to me as I'm walking out the door with, with this, this one well-worn phrase just to remind me how important the right kind of friends are. And she would say, "Tim, just remember, you're known by the company you keep." Anyone got that one thrown at them? So in other words, if the police show up where you're at, they're not going to ask how many Bible verses and how many Sunday school pins you've got hanging on you. You're going to end up in the back of the squad car just like all your other buddies. So just Be mindful, good friends are important.

There's another saying. I didn't get— I didn't hear this, but when I heard it, I loved this phrase here, and it comes from the Bible. Lie down with dogs, rise up with fleas. Anyone heard that one? It's a very vivid descriptor, and if you have a dog, you know that it's also pretty true. Don't you know what he does? Do you know who else is going to be at that party? What path of unrighteousness is this guy going to lead the blessed down? And I feel like that's how the disciples must have felt when they walked into Levi's house. What will people say if they see us in this place? And then the worst thing happens. The preacher and the Sunday school teacher show up. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law walk in, and there they are.

Matthew's story and Matthew's party reminds us that Jesus has invited us to a table that is not reserved for the healthy and the righteous, at least those who think they are. And that's you and me. That's how you got your invitation in the first place. And so today we come because Jesus invited us,

not because we earned our seat. We receive mercy, and then as we receive mercy, we become the kind of people that carry mercy everywhere we go, into every room, into every office, every backyard, every awkward guest list. We just take mercy with us all over the place. Mercy for the man who betrayed his family and his friends so he could have some money and power. Mercy for the woman whose story people whisper about behind her back and sometimes straight to her face.

And this is the tension in this passage in Luke. This happens right after Levi— or Jesus heals the paralyzed man. That was our lesson last week. So this happens not long after that, and Jesus leaves that place and he notices Levi, who is a tax collector, and he's sitting in his little tax booth collecting the coins and the taxes from people. And Jesus says, Follow me. And the follower of Jesus says, "I'm here because I have decided to follow Jesus." And this is where Jesus is. I felt like everyone was looking at me. I'm like, okay, do I, do I order from the bar? How do I order from the bar? Where do I go up to the bar to order? Is there a place? I was just in the car with them. I was in the back seat. That's all I was doing. I'm just, I'm here. I'm here.

Mercy gets you mocked. Mercy gets you really misunderstood. Mercy makes people question your judgment. Mercy makes people nervous, even religious people, and maybe religious people most of all sometimes. But mercy is what Jesus desires from us.

I want to share something with you that has to stay in this room. If you're watching online, I need you to mute and turn it off right now. Do I just maybe get a corner table over here and wait for a waitress to come and ask me an order like they do at Applebee's? What do I do? And it was, I mean, It's a lot of stress when all you really want is a cherry Diet Coke. That's all you want. But still, it's like, oh my word. I was a naive little Pentecostal kid from Springville, Indiana. I mean, I was 38. But still, I had never been in a bar before. I felt raw. I felt unsophisticated.

Now, for the disciples, um, they know Matthew. They've seen him around. They've probably paid taxes to him at some point in time. And so when Jesus says, "Hey boys, wash your feet, put on some clean clothes, we're going to a party at Matthew's," I'm sure these guys were like, uh, hold on just a second. Don't you know who that is?

But if you know that you desperately need mercy and you're willing to quickly share it with others, then Jesus says, that's what I'm looking for right there. Like Matthew. Matthew says to his friends, I'm gonna throw a party. I'm hanging streamers. We're gonna blow up balloons. Sacrifice is noble. People admire you for sacrifice. Tim, we just, you're doing such, we just love, I'm just, I respect you so much. This is, this is, I know you've just, sacrifice gets medals pinned to your chest. Statues in the town

square are raised in honor of your sacrifice. Jesus loves mercy. Mercy for the ones we might prefer just to keep at a safe distance away from our parties.

And I know that it's really tempting for us to think that mercy is for those kind of people. Not us. It's not that we're too good for mercy, it's that we just don't need that much of it. And Jesus says, if that's where you are, then fine, good luck. He's not— he's not here for you, obviously.

We're gonna make a big deal about this. The punch is not gonna be Spack, but I'm gonna throw on some Eurythmics, and we're gonna have a party. And I'm inviting Jesus, 'cause I met this guy, and he invited me to follow him, even though he knew the very worst about me, he still wants to hang out with me.

And then maybe a prayer of thanks for the Matthew in your life who said, hey, I met Jesus, I want you to meet him too. And then maybe your third prayer could be for that person in your life right now that you might prefer to avoid. Maybe they betrayed you, maybe they've hurt you, maybe they just embarrass you. Maybe they live in a way that bothers your sense of right and wrong. But in this moment, maybe Jesus can give you some mercy for them. My prayer is the Holy Spirit will help you see your relationship with them not as a problem, but as an opportunity to share God's heart for people who are overlooked, unwanted, or far from him.

All right. Jesus, thank you for extending your grace to us. Your obedience to the cross means that now we can come to the parties that you throw. As we take the bread and the cup this morning, may this moment, may this remembrance, may this opportunity be a catalyst for others to experience your mercy and grace just as we have. May we be eager to invite others to know you. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you for listening to this message from Sherwood Oaks Christian Church. Did you know you can watch all of our video content, both current and past, on our YouTube channel? This morning, as you take the bread and the cup, can you first give thanks to Jesus, who in his mercy gave his life on the cross so that you and I can freely receive grace and healing and hope. We're gonna take communion here in just a moment. And as we come to the communion table, It reminds us that Jesus is still eating with sinners. Look around. Go ahead, do it. Jesus still eats with sinners.