

Why You Should Invite Sinners Into Your Inner Circle

“As Jesus was at supper in his house, many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples. For there were many, and they followed Him. When the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, ‘How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?’” (Mark 2:15-16, MEV).

In the earlier years of his ministry, Billy Graham was frequently criticized for associating with members of Christian traditions different from his own. He defended himself with this poem:

*He drew a circle that shut me out;
Rebel, heretic, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win,
He drew a circle that took me in.*

That’s exactly what Jesus does for us, and with Levi and his “sinner” friends. He took them in!

This is the third time in Mark’s gospel that Jesus was in a home: first, Peter and Andrew’s for the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31); then the home where the paralytic was let down through the roof (Mark 2:1-12); and now, third, the home of the tax collector Levi.

Jesus told Levi earlier in the day, “Follow Me!” And the first place Jesus took Levi was Levi’s own home.

Too frequently I look at Jesus’ call as a romanticist: faraway places, splendid fields of glory, euphoria in life. But like Levi, the first place Jesus calls you and me is to our homes—where the issues of life unfold daily.

And look who comes to dinner with Jesus at Levi's house! Not your average church crowd!

I tend to hang around people I know because that's where my comfort level is. How different is the gregarious Son of God! While He Himself is righteous and without sin, He continually opens Himself to the company of those whose standards fail to meet even the demands of the "good moral persons" within His own society: He dined with political pariahs—tax collectors who collaborated with an occupying military force and sinners—those who kept neither the ceremonial nor the moral law.

It is often true that the longer we follow Christ, the fewer non-Christian friends we have. We enjoy the company of those who share our faith and values. We need to more carefully assess how our own friendship circle aligns with what Jesus did.

Recently our family was on a cruise and, on the last night, a young lady who had been our server asked me privately if she could ask a question. Evidently, she had listened to our table conversations as she brought food and observed our time of prayer at the beginning of each meal. Her question was profound: "How can I know which way is the right way?"

How can we answer spiritual hunger like that? Of course, I gave a verbal witness and have sent follow-up material. But the best answer can be given only in the context of presence. Jesus was present at the table with sinners and tax collectors. Rather than give them a lecture or sermon, He took time to be with them.

Once people know you, they can begin to trust you and open their hearts. In turn, you will have earned the right to be heard. So let's draw a circle that takes them in!

A Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that You ate with sinners and tax collectors for I now feel welcome at Your table. I see that my

*own sinfulness is not a barrier to Your availability to me.
You welcome me into Your presence. {eo}*

*Excerpted from Dr. Wood's book, Fearless: How Jesus Changes Everything, available from Vital Resources. **George O. Wood** is the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God.*

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