

## Eating With Tax Collectors and Sinners

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on June 6, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26.

1) IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

How controversial can eating and drinking with someone be? Pretty controversial! As late as the 1960s it was controversial for a White person to eat with a Black person in many parts of the United States. We actually had laws telling us who could eat where with whom. At that time lots of 5 and 10 stores had lunch counters where Black people could not sit down and eat. Black people had to stand up and go to another place in the store to be served. And this system of segregation was actually supported by the church and many Christians.

Then something historic happened on February 1, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Four African American students walked into the downtown Woolworth store, sat down at the "Whites Only" lunch counter. They were all teenagers. They were freshman at North Carolina A and T college. They were all recipients of academic scholarships. They wanted to order some coffee and donuts but they were refused service. So they continued to sit there silently - until the store closed, at 5:30. They left but came back again the next day and sat down at the lunch counter and waited to be served. They were not served. Other young Black men and women joined them. The students were well behaved and polite. The sit-ins lasted five months before Woolworth agreed to integrate its lunch counter. Those four young men did something courageous and controversial. They didn't sit down at the lunch counter just because they were hungry. They were making a statement. They were throwing down the gauntlet to a whole system in the name of an alternative vision of what society should be.

2) Jesus was doing something every bit as controversial as those Black young people integrating a lunch counter. He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners.

a) Let's be clear as to who the tax-collectors and sinners were. Basically, they were non-churched people. They'd never been to Sunday School or church or if they had, they'd stopped going. They were not necessarily "bad" people, people who were worse than others. They simply didn't go to synagogue or *could not go* because of their work. They were not

necessarily terrible sinners, murderers and such. They were simply people who weren't very religious. Some of them may have been notorious sinners. Most of them were simply unreligious and unfamiliar with religious beliefs and customs.

b) It's hard for us to understand today, but religious people back then believed it was wrong to eat and drink with unreligious people. It was wrong to have non-religious friends. If you were a Pharisee all your friends would be like you. They'd go to church. They'd go to Sabbath school. They'd be good, church going people. So Jesus angered these good, religious, people when he ate with tax collectors and sinners. What Jesus did incited bitter anger that led eventually to his denunciation, arrest, and execution and led to his cross.

3) Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners for several reasons. <sup>a)</sup> For one reason, he really enjoyed them. He enjoyed their humor. He enjoyed their stories. He enjoyed their humility. They knew they were sinners. They knew they weren't as good as they should be. They didn't put on airs. They didn't try to make people think they were more religious or godly than they really were. And Jesus loved them for this.

b) Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners for another reason. He ate and drank with sinners as a witness to us church people about God's love for the unchurched. He knew eating and drinking with these non church people would be controversial. He knew by eating and drinking with these people he'd lose the respect of many religious people. He did it anyway because he wanted to bear witness to God's attitude toward the unchurched. Jesus shows us that God loves the unchurched. God doesn't condemn them. God doesn't want them to go to hell. God really loves them. And if we love God and trust in Jesus we will have the same love for the unchurched. The same desire to see them included among God's people.

4. I believe our church's number one priority should be eating and drinking with the unchurched. I wish every one of us loved unchurched, non-religious people so much that we'd spend time with them, have lunch with them, listen to them, laugh with them and pray for them. Pray that they'd come to know how much God loves them. Pray that they want to come to praise and thank God through Christ for his love, grace and friendship. Amen.