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2012

# Was Jesus Right to Eat with Sinners and Tax Collectors?

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## Recommended Citation

Kilgallen, John. "Was Jesus Right to Eat with Sinners and Tax Collectors?" *Biblica*, 42(4), 2012: 590-600. Available at <http://bsw.org/Biblica/Vol-93-2012/Was-Jesus-Right-To-Eat-With-Sinners-And-Tax-Collectors/510/>.

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## Was Jesus Right to Eat with Sinners and Tax Collectors?

According to Luke, the accusations brought to Pilate to justify Rome's putting Jesus to death were three: claiming to be Messiah or King, refusing to have people pay taxes to Rome, and inciting the people to revolution (23,2). What apparently moved the Sanhedrin earlier to bring Jesus to Pilate for judgment centered on two points: Jesus' refusal to deny that he is Messiah of Israel and Son of God (22,67-71). From a complete reading of the Gospel one knows of lesser criticisms of Jesus, such as his apparent disrespect of the Sabbath. One fault of Jesus is the subject of this essay. This is the fault of associating with and eating with sinners and tax-collectors<sup>1</sup>.

To give fair understanding to Jesus' critics in this matter, usually but not always Pharisees, it is best to begin by recalling the intentions of these critics<sup>2</sup>. Pharisees, and those like them, had an intense desire to obey the Law of Moses as it had been handed down to them with all of its accretions. The history of the Pharisees bears witness to their attempts at perfection, with suffering martyrdom the surest sign of their intense devotion to Yahweh. Given their appreciation and desire for perfection, one finds it easy to understand their wanting this perfection in all Jews, for to this perfect obedience all Israel was called. Indeed, many of Israel, imperfect as they were in their own lives, esteemed the Pharisees greatly and respected their practices and teachings. Even the criticism of Jesus towards the Pharisees does no harm to the lofty ideals they espoused and urged others to embrace as well<sup>3</sup>. If the Pharisees held other Israelites in lesser esteem, it was only as a confirmation of their impatience with sins and sinners against the Law.

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<sup>1</sup> "This aspect of Jesus' ministry has been admirably surveyed in a brief monograph by O. Hofius (*Jesu Tischgemeinschaft mit den Sündern* [Stuttgart 1967]) who claims that the table fellowship of Jesus with such people was a sign of the extension of God's forgiveness to them and at the same time an anticipation of the eschatological meal in the kingdom of God", I.H. MARSHALL, *Luke. Historian and Theologian* (Downers Grove, IL 1998) 138.

<sup>2</sup> "On the one hand, the religious authorities (particularly Pharisees) are 'respectful of Jesus and afford him the honor due a 'teacher', which is the term by which they address him ... Pharisees ... are attracted to Jesus coming from all over to hear him teach (5,17)", J.D. KINGSBURY, *Conflict in Luke. Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis, MN 1991) 26.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII.1: "The cities give great attestations to them [Pharisees] on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also". Cf. also *Against Apion* 2:232-234: "Now, as for ourselves [not only Pharisees, but surely Pharisees included], I venture to say, that no one can tell of so many; nay, not of more than one or two that have

A hallmark of Pharisaic determination to reach perfection was the tendency to control sinfulness by a kind of exaggeration. For instance, it was “wiser” to wash one’s forearm to the elbow so as to make sure that one’s hand is truly clean, as the Law insists on cleanliness of hands. A further nuance of this kind of thinking is the demand that one avoid sinners, especially in matters which suggest a sharing of ideas. This avoidance was often expressed, for brevity’s sake, as “not fraternizing or associating with sinners, not going into their houses, and not eating with them”<sup>4</sup>. Such activities gave hint, it seems, that one approves the immoral life of sinners; one should not risk giving that approval. Business relationships were understandable, but familiarity in the usual activities that expressed unity — such was wrong. What also seems to lie behind this way of thinking about the possible influence of evil men upon good is nothing less than the large history of Israel; it seemed that every time a Jew would associate with “the impure”, the Jew came away with a lessening of his devotion to Yahweh. Such associations should not be encouraged or even tolerated. Not only should one not suggest an indifference to the lives of sinners, but one should avoid them lest one fall into their sinfulness. Finally, how best to influence a change of behavior in sinners, if not to avoid them and so make them ever conscious of their sinfulness?

### I. Jesus and Levi’s guests (chap. 5)

Thus, when we consider the life of Jesus, it is not strange to find him criticized with the question, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (5,30)<sup>5</sup>. Jesus caused this question when he partook of a

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betrayed our laws, no, not out of fear of death itself; I do not mean such an easy death as happens in battles, but that which comes with bodily torments, and seems to be the severest kind of death of all others. Now, I think those who have conquered us have put us to such deaths, not out of their hatred to us when they had subdued us, but rather out of their desire of seeing a surprising sight, which is this, whether there are such men in the world who believe that no evil is to them so great as to be compelled to do or to speak anything contrary to their own laws. Nor ought men to wonder at us, if we are more courageous in dying for our laws than all other men are”. For a more accurate understanding of Josephus’ remarks, cf. S. MASON, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees*. A composition-critical study (Leiden<sup>2</sup>1991) and *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, MA<sup>2</sup>2003).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lev 10,10: “You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean”; from this resulted “the Pharisaic idea of salvation by segregation”, W. MANSON, *The Gospel of Luke* (MNTC; London 1948), 55; J. FITZMYER, *The Gospel of Luke I-LX* (AB 28, New York 1981) 589.

<sup>5</sup> It is equally strange, and indeed ironic, that the Pharisees and others like them, did not seem to realize that they, too, were objects of Jesus’ call to re-

significant dinner arranged by Levi (Matthew) in the wake of his obedience to the call of Jesus to him: "Follow me"<sup>6</sup>. The response of Jesus to those finding fault with him for this meal fellowship explains the intention of Jesus here: "I have come to call sinners" (5,32). What is lacking, so to speak, though easily inferred, is that Jesus thinks that mingling with sinners and tax-collectors is a means to his goal, a method of leading these sinners to repentance<sup>7</sup>. Jesus gives no explicit expression of this means to conversion, leaving the reader to supply for himself how just Jesus was in the way he chose to lead sinners to repentance<sup>8</sup>. Certainly, there are no explicitly reported choices of means here to gain repentance from dinner guests, though obviously we should infer, without Luke's guidance, that Levi, the convener of the banquet, practices works indicative of repentance. Indeed, the purpose of the story focuses not on means, but rather on a proper answer to the question put to him, "Why ... ?" Jesus answered with "because" he, Son of Man, was sent to call sinners to repentance. His is a divine mission; this is his answer. But restricting himself to this "reason-for-acting" does not really explain why he has chosen this method to effect his desired result: why must he eat and drink with sinners in order to achieve his goal?

Here, we should put into play what we had discussed earlier, namely that the Pharisees, too, sought the conversion of sinners. They share the goal of Jesus; it is a question, then, of means. The Pharisees would never have considered Jesus' approach to sinners. Why not? We repeat reasons given earlier. It seems right to say that they, like many others, think that

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repentance through eating and drinking with them. Certainly Jesus criticized these people, as Luke has indicated, at dinners with calls, indeed extensive calls, to change their ways (7,36-50; 11,37-52; 14,1-24). Who would understand better than they the value of repentance? Such repentance, however, did not include abandonment of their holy practices; as Jesus said: "Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside? But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you" (11,40-41). Jesus ate and drank with every type of sinner.

<sup>6</sup> "In the criticism the present tense of the verb 'eats' ... implies a habitual eating with such people ... The criticism of Jesus may well have reached his ears already, since his attending such meals was a habitual practice", M. MULLINS *The Gospel of Luke* (Dublin 2010) 200.

<sup>7</sup> "... in Luke's story the good news of Jesus' identification with sinful humanity is incomplete without the invitation to a reorienting of one's life", R. KARRIS, "The Gospel according to Luke", *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (eds. R.E. BROWN – J.A. FITZMYER – R.E. MURPHY) (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1990) 693.

<sup>8</sup> "Le verbe, ἐλήλυθα (v. 32), a ici un sens messianique, et qu'il soit employé à l'aoriste chez Marc et Mathieu et au parfait chez Luc, il embrasse toute la vie de Jesus", F. BOVON, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc 1-9* (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament 3; Genève 1991) 252.

association with evil will inevitably make one evil. Moreover, what is the right way to bring a sinner to his senses? By fraternizing with him, and thus dulling in him criticism of his sinfulness, or segregation, which becomes a clear, silent statement of reproach by the community with the hope of embarrassment, or its like, and repentance?

However Luke's reader answers these questions about Jesus' conduct and remarks in this very brief story, it is equally clear that Jesus does not explain why he has chosen socialization with sinners as the proper means to their repentance; Luke's concern is to show explicitly that Jesus' goal is nothing less than the fulfillment of the divine command that he call sinners to repentance<sup>9</sup>. Thus, though one might ask the text why Jesus chose as his means a controversial practice such as eating with sinners and receive no clear answer, one does know he is putting to the text a question that the text was not constructed to answer.

We conclude: it is clear that we are given a reason why Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors, but is his method to bring about repentance successful? Did repentance result from his fraternization with sinners? One might argue that logic assures us of the repentance of Levi, or one might argue that as the patient is cured only in the presence of the physician, so sinners are cured when Jesus is actually present with them. However, the value of Jesus' fraternization with sinners is not explicitly expressed; the passage is not interested in affirming the profit of Jesus' method and so we must look elsewhere in his public life to be satisfied.

## II. Jesus and the People of this Generation (chap. 7)

In chap. 7 Luke again brings up the subject of Jesus' association with sinners with the description: "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7,34). This statement, which describes the opinion of the "people of this generation", comes at the end of a discourse which appeared directed elsewhere. Jesus had been asked if he was "the one to come", or not; as answer he pointed to the works he performed, works which Luke associated appositely with the prophetic words of Isaiah, presumably about "the one who is to come". After this answer, Jesus presents his understanding of the meaning of John the Baptist: a prophet, more than a prophet; indeed, "my messenger in front of you to prepare your way before you" (7,27). To this astounding revelation Jesus feels

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<sup>9</sup> "To appreciate the behavior of those under Jesus' sway involves seeing sinners as needy and able to be helped, rather than as contaminating and deserving to be spurned", J. NOLLAND, *Luke 1-9:20* (WBC 35a; Dallas, TX 1989) 246.

obliged to demur: great as John is, anyone who believes in Jesus (= “the least in the kingdom of heaven”) will have the greater reward.

This attention to “faith in Jesus” moves the discourse to include the moral plane. Luke himself interrupts Jesus’ speech to offer a summary of responses to the famed call of John to repentance; some indeed accepted his baptism, but certain religious leaders frustrated God’s plan for saving them<sup>10</sup>. It is in the light of this Lucan parenthesis that Jesus speaks again, to complain against the “people of this generation”. These people accept neither John nor Jesus, and reject them based on the conduct of each.

Presumably John’s call to repentance will not be accepted because he is possessed by Satan and so not from God; his way of life, the people of this generation say, proves this possession.

Jesus faces opposition and refusal for a different reason. He is not accused of being possessed by Satan (though on another occasion certain people said, “By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons”, 11,15). His rejection is based on something else, namely the charge, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7,34). One can say that such a charge comes purely from a refusal to repent, no matter the conduct of him who calls to repentance. We can add, however, that Jesus’ conduct was in such conflict with prevalent religious opinion and practice that faith in him was most unlikely<sup>11</sup>. In the face of this criticism Jesus offers a wisdom saying that applies to his situation: “But wisdom is vindicated (declared just) by all her children” (7,35). This proverb, applicable to more than this one situation, suggests here that repentance proves that wisdom is truly wise. Religious leaders, as we have explained them, know that the repentant person is indeed a wise person, and fulfills God’s plan for salvation in Israel. Thus, it is to the result of Jesus’ methods for repentance that Jesus appeals; that is, look to the result of my association with sinners and learn from this result the positive value of the means which achieves this result, my befriending sinners and tax collectors. The argumentation is succinct, leaving the listener to work out its logic.

In brief, Jesus once again looks to his goal in conducting himself as he does, the goal of his mission as he speaks of it at the dinner with tax collectors and sinners (5,32). What Jesus offers now in chap. 7 is a proof that his method is justified, for, in a generalized statement in proverbial form, he points to a number of people who have done what God and Wisdom

<sup>10</sup> The point had been made about sinners before the Gospel was written: “ἀγνοοῦντες γὰρ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην καὶ τὴν ἰδίαν [δικαιοσύνην] ζητοῦντες στήσαι, τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ὑπετάγησαν” (Rom 10,3).

<sup>11</sup> “It is altogether clear that Jesus does not ‘stand off’ as he should (and as they do) by these standards [of the Pharisees based on texts of their Scriptures] and that, to this degree, in their eyes he lacks the comportment of one who is ‘righteous’”, D. JEFFREY, *Luke* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids, MI 2012) 191.

have asked: they have repented. And, as always, the repentant person was no less an interest for the “people of this age” who rejected John and Jesus because of their methods, both their call and their identities.

What might we make of the fact that immediately following Jesus’ words we are to read the story about a sinner (ἁμαρτωλός) forgiven her sins and about a Pharisee who is little forgiven? It would not be amiss to note that we are presented with a repentant woman, which suggests that Jesus, so recently mentioned as a “friend of sinners and tax collectors”, has success in his method of bringing about repentance. Certainly, the story means to exemplify the proverb, “Wisdom is justified by her children”<sup>12</sup>, but we cannot ignore the means whereby this child has justified Wisdom; also, we can presume a new moral life for this repentant woman.

Thus far, we have been given the motive for which Jesus associates with sinners, and a reference at least in a general way to the success of this association as found in the repentant who have responded to Jesus and to John, but we continue to look for an explicit example of repentance.

### III. Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees (chap.15)

Once again, in chap. 15, we meet the same criticism against Jesus that he fraternizes with sinners; this time, the objection is phrased: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (15,2). It is Pharisees and Sadducees who criticize now, and who make up part of the audience of Jesus; the other part is, indeed, sinners and tax collectors. Clearly, what Luke had offered his reader in chapters 5 and 7 did not exhaust his interest in this matter; the criticism deserves further reflection, and this time it will be with one of Jesus’ favorite rhetorical methods: the parable.

Practically all of chap. 15 is a long presentation by Jesus, which consists of three parables with only occasional, but crucial, comment by him (vv. 7 and 10). The first two parables are strikingly similar in form, though not identical in content<sup>13</sup>; quite different for a number of reasons is the third, that usually titled “The Prodigal Son”<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> NOLLAND, *Luke*, 353: “The touching display of affectionate gratitude shown to Jesus by this woman off the street well illustrates the claim of v. 35 that Wisdom is justified by her children”.

<sup>13</sup> Note for instance in the second parable the omitted reference to the “ninety-nine who need no finding” of the first parable. Perhaps this omission is explained by saying that the source for the first parable, but not the second, is drawn from Q.

<sup>14</sup> “Doppelgleichnis und Sohnparabel, die inhaltlich verwandt waren, durch Unterstreichung der Freude über das Wiedergefundene zur Apologie Jesu gegenüber Gegnern und zu einer Einladung zur Mitfreude zu machen”, W. WIEFEL, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (THzNT 3; Berlin 1988) 281.

Looking to the first two parables, with an eye to the criticism against Jesus, we note two pertinent points. First, the shepherd, searches for his lost sheep till he finds it <sup>15</sup>. Second, the shepherd in his joy at having found his sheep prepares a dinner at which he will rejoice with his friends and neighbors. The second parable presents a woman who, as the shepherd parable in its own way underlines, sweeps unceasingly till she finds her lost coin, and also invites friends to share a joyful dinner in celebration.

These two parables offer two lessons of interest to us. They show that it is unremitting searching that finds what was lost, not disinterest in or distance from sheep or coin. Certainly, leaving them lost achieves not a thing. Moreover, finding what was lost leads surely to great joy and celebration. The latter aspect, that of rejoicing over finding what was lost, confirms the value of searching, achieving happiness for going after what was lost till it is found. Indeed, one cannot imagine how else the sheep and the coin will be found except by continued searching. It is at the end of each of the parables that Jesus intervenes; both interventions make real what is only imaginary in the parables. Jesus, in his authoritative way, reveals the great joy among the angels at the finding of a sinner <sup>16</sup>. Indeed, Jesus underlines in these first two parables of shepherd and sheep the joy of heaven over the repentance of the sinner, even once saying that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance” (v. 7). One can mull over which is the greater point of these parables, unremitting search or joy at finding what was lost, but in relation to the criticism of Pharisees and Scribes (v. 2), it is clear that heaven itself reveals the rightness of the search for sinners and their repentance by revealing its joy at the success of the searchers. Indeed, the parables suggest that there is no other way but searching that can bring about repentance.

The third parable reinforces this point of the first two parables. True, there is no ‘searching’ after the lost son, and so the parallel with the first two parables is lacking on this crucial point. But there is no missing the repetition of Jesus’ teaching about the rejoicing due to repentance. Though some of Jesus’ audience may disagree with the lavishness of the father, no one would dispute the goodness of the father in his reception of his son <sup>17</sup>; the father’s

<sup>15</sup> πορεύεται ἐπὶ τὸ ἀπολωλὸς ἕως εὕρη αὐτό, v. 4.

<sup>16</sup> ἐπὶ ἐνὶ ἁμαρτωλῷ μετανοοῦντι, vv. 7 and 10.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J.A. METZGER, *Consumption and Wealth in Luke’s Travel Narrative* (Leiden – Boston, MA 2008) 84-108. The father’s lavishness can cause Jesus’ audience to leave him, saying that “I know of no father so generous to a wayward son”. But the force behind the father’s actions is his realization, soon to be expressed, that “what was lost is found”, indeed “what was dead is alive”. Such an understanding of the situation might help listeners to adjust their judgment of the father favorably.



reasoning for his actions is not only convincing but revelatory. What was lost is now found, surely; but also what was dead now is alive.

Jesus is giving a profound explanation of the result of repentance, against which one should evaluate the search for repentance. It is a matter of life and death, nothing less. The Pharisees and Scribes will not disagree about the relationship between earthly repentance and heavenly joy, though its profundity can be hard to keep fresh in one's mind. On the basis of this one parable, so dramatically forceful, Jesus' critics see no relation between celebration and searching: the father does not search for his son. But the point is not there. This third parable means only to reinforce what the first two parables had made clear: whatever can produce joy in heaven is worth doing. One cannot prefer not searching after sinners, if one is convinced that such searching is the way, the best and necessary way, to produce joy, and life.

Chapter 15, the third attempt to answer the criticism that Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them", presents the justification for "searching". Let us ask again: can joy at finding justify the search? That heaven rejoices over the result of Jesus' winning over sinners is assurance that the means is justified by its effect. We should add to the praise of Wisdom by her children, then, the joyfulness of heaven as further proof that Jesus' way of trying to convert sinners to repentance is valid. Yet, it is reasonable to look for a teaching beyond parable; we look for a clear example of the effect of Jesus' fraternization with sinners.

#### IV. Jesus and Zacchaeus (chap. 19)

The fourth occurrence of this criticism, that Jesus 'fraternizes with sinners' in his public life, is in chap. 19; the complaint is this time from a crowd: "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner" (v. 7), who, indeed, is a chief tax collector. Luke makes no mention of "eating and drinking", but such activity can be presumed from the word "stay" (μείναι), since one can assume such hospitality in this circumstance, given what we have read earlier. There are certain features of this story which distinguish it from the previous three examples already cited.

For the first time we have a real individual and situation before us; previously, we had groups mentioned, but no individual, and imagined figures in parable form. In addition, we have for the first time mentioned a general criticism of Jesus from a group traveling with him, not altogether the "people of this age". Also, the suggestion that we are to see a tight relationship between "salvation" ("Today salvation has come to this house") and repentance is, in the Gospel, first offered here. In addition, we read that Jesus "must stay" in Zacchaeus' house; this is similar to Jesus' earlier statement, that "he was sent" to call sinners, but δὲ μὲ μείναι (19,5) brings us much more directly into the sphere of the divine predestination which has determined all things.

For our purposes, the most striking feature we find in this story is the fact that we have been given a clear example of the result which comes from Jesus' fraternizing with sinners. Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector (= sinner), emerges from a time spent with Jesus and announces his intention of fulfilling the ideal of the law governing the return of stolen property<sup>18</sup>. Jesus' comments on this assurance of repentance is also a forceful claim which supports his earlier recognition of his mission to save the "lost", a neat literary reminder of Jesus' parables about the lost sheep, coin and son. There is no missing the obvious link of means and end, which was not absolutely, explicitly assured in the previous examples wherein Jesus was accused of doing wrong in associating with tax collectors and sinners.

A literary feature of Luke further draws our attention to the point under consideration here. Just after our author notes how Zacchaeus hurried from his perch in the tree to welcome Jesus joyfully, the crowd as critics is introduced. One can, with a certain logic, expect that this look to the criticism of the crowd<sup>19</sup> interferes with the development of the story, a development which should assure that the reception of Jesus will be followed without "distraction" by the response of Zacchaeus about his repentance. Yet if the purpose of the story, as we think it does, includes a sign of repentance as justification for Jesus' lodging with a sinner, the logic of the story as it stands is quite acceptable and sensible<sup>20</sup>.

It also seems best to say that the disposition of Zacchaeus before his moment of repentance was a "benevolent" curiosity. There is no clear indication that Zacchaeus' desire and effort to "see" Jesus actually concealed an incipient repentance. No, it is only the actual time spent with Jesus that accounts for repentance.

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<sup>18</sup> Exodus 21,1, Lev 6,5, and Num 5,6-7 are examples of the sense of retribution that explains the kind of repentance Zacchaeus expresses.

<sup>19</sup> L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville, MN 1991) 285, comments that the clause ἰδόντες πάντες διεγόγγυζον (v.7) "would include the disciples and the crowd and the opponents", since "all" complained. It seems better to say that "all" is one of many examples of Lucan writing which should not be taken at face value; since the story's only expressed precedent for πάντες is ὄχλου (v. 3), it seems right to conclude that it is the "crowd", which had not experienced Jesus' earlier associations with sinners and tax collectors, that complains.

<sup>20</sup> "[Zacchaeus'] use of the present tense in 'I'm giving' and 'I'm paying back' for what he has yet to do emphasizes that these actions are so sure and soon to be done that they're as good as in process right now", R. GUNDRY, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA 2010) 316. For a discussion of the interpretations of the words of Zacchaeus in regard to the time of his monetary expression of repentance, cf. L. TICHY, "Was hat Zachäus geantwortet? (Lk 19,8)?" , *Bib* 92 (2011) 21-38.

Four times Luke presents disagreement, if not conflict, over Jesus' practice of eating with sinners and tax collectors, of fraternizing with these people beyond what "the pious" would be allowed to do. He is brought to task by no one group, but by a variety of critics: Pharisees and their Scribes (5,30), people of this generation (7,31), Pharisees and Scribes (15,2) and a crowd (19,7); the Pharisees, it is clear, are his major opponents in this matter. Each of Luke's stories containing Jesus' eating with sinners and fraternizing with them has, as part of the narration, a justification of Jesus' practice. Luke intends to show not only that Jesus has acted correctly before sinners, but preferably so.

With the Levi incident we have clearly the purpose for which Jesus is engaged in what might, within traditional Jewish moral traditions, be considered against Jewish practice and the Divine Will. Indeed, it is by that Divine Will that he explains his action as obedience. Also present is the suggestion that Levi (possibly others) has repented and begun to show a moral change, but this is left to the judgment of the reader and not demonstrated, for the moral life is not a concern of this story.

The second reference of interest comes from a description, presumably true, of "this generation": it charges Jesus with eating and consorting with sinners. In this case, such a conduct is reason for not having faith in Jesus, for such conduct is not approved by God. This story affords Luke the opportunity to argue that Jesus does indeed achieve God's desire for repentance; one need only to look to the repentant to find one who has become God's child. No attempt is made or need be made to cite examples of repentance; it is enough to give the reason that justifies Jesus' conduct.

The third moment of this repeated criticism occurs when, in pursuit of sinners' repentance, Jesus is observed by Pharisees and Scribes to 'welcome sinners and eat with them' (15,2). This criticism introduces three famous parables. This trio of imaginary stories shows no interest in detailing repentant morality<sup>21</sup>; what it does is show the results of repentance, particularly from the viewpoint of Heaven. These parables are meant to encourage those sinners who listen favorably to Jesus, but equally they are meant to make clear to Jesus' critics the supreme value of his efforts to encourage repentance. True, there is the young son who for his less than exalted reasons seeks forgiveness, but the parables do not describe morality which is the fruit of repentance. For such a description we must look elsewhere. Here, however, we do learn to understand and appreciate the single-minded goodness of Jesus.

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<sup>21</sup> The immediacy with which the story of the Pharisee and forgiven woman follows upon Jesus' response to the criticism of "this generation" indicates that Luke means to show the fruit of Jesus' preaching repentance to this woman; she is, in other words, a fine example of the children who justify Wisdom — yet she is not pictured as is Zacchaeus, who follows his repentance with practice.

Finally, we reach the story of Zacchaeus, who, after Jesus spends time with him in Zacchaeus' house near Jericho, gives significant proof of the effect of association with Jesus. Luke prefers here to finally describe what this new moral life will exhibit: "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over" (19,8). Attention to financial reparation fits admirably with Luke's own recognized interest in the right use of riches, but one can assume that other virtuous actions urged in Jesus' teaching in the Gospel will form part of this repentant sinner. So, Zacchaeus will act justly and recompense those he has cheated. With this story in place, one finally reads what he has all along supposed or expected from Jesus' familiarity with sinners: his method has produced the fruit of repentance which is a convincing proof that Jesus has been correct to associate with sinners.

Luke has made clear from early in the public life (5,32; cf. 4,18-19) that Jesus has been aware of his divine calling to ask that sinners repent; it is the privileged way to lead people into the kingdom, the announcement of which Jesus must<sup>22</sup> preach. Though all four stories about the purpose of Jesus' fraternization with sinners can argue Jesus' correctness, it is the Zacchaeus story which finally justifies Jesus before his critics (the "proof that is in the pudding", so to speak), thereby revealing a convincing element of the innocence of Jesus before God and Israel, which helps complete the defense of Jesus as the one who knows best both God's plan for salvation and how to achieve it.

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## SUMMARY

All Jewish religious teachers wanted sinners to repent; how one achieves this was disputed, as was Jesus' choosing to associate with sinners in their houses and at their meals. Four times Luke describes Jesus as fraternizing with sinners, which violated Jewish pious practice. The first three times (chaps. 5, 7 and 15) Jesus underlines his motive for this conduct and its value; the fourth time (chap. 19), and rather late in the Gospel, Luke shows that indeed Jesus' method proved true, i.e. the wisdom of his conduct was shown justified by repentant children of God.

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<sup>22</sup> δει (4,43) signals the profound divine intention in sending Jesus to announce the kingdom of God. Repentance, which Jesus has been sent to inspire, is the primary and subordinate means by which this divine plan is achieved. With the forgiveness of sins we are far beyond the 'Jubilee Year' category by which some interpret Jesus' self-identification through the words of Isaiah (4,18-19).