

Who Should We Invite to the Lord's Table

Luke 14:15-23

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ABC's "Shark Tank" is one of the most popular shows on television. It features a panel of rich business executives and investors called "Sharks," who listen to pitches from entrepreneurs, inventors, and small business owners who are seeking funding and a shark to partner with them in their business venture.

If you have seen the show you have probably seen a couple of patterns emerge from the Sharks. One, no matter how great the business idea or how much they like the personal story of the person pitching the idea, if the Sharks do not think they can make money, they will not invest. The Sharks are not into charity.

Two, when it comes to making money, the Sharks want to know if the person asking for money understands his or her market.

Once a man was on the show who had a small business selling nutrition bars made from crickets. Yep, insects! He passed out his cricket bars for sampling and talked about their nutritional value. As he talked, he explained that the crickets were ground up into a flour and that the flour was sold to other dealers to make other items.

As it turned out, the businessman didn't make the nutrition bars, which increased his cost. The Sharks quickly discovered that the value of the man's business was not in his nutrition bars but was in his cricket flour, which no one else was making. That's when they got interested. That's when he got a deal.

As a church, we preach the good news about Jesus Christ, who frees us from our brokenness and sin. Whenever we lose focus and start peddling other items and forget that the real value of what we have to offer is the love, grace, and forgiveness of God through Jesus, we eventually lose people's interest.

People want to know, "Do you love me? Do you care about me?" "Do you love my child?" "Do you care about my teenager?" "Do you care about me when I fail? Do you care about me when I am wounded, if I am different, if I am lonely, if I am depressed, if I feel overwhelmed?"

"Love the Lord our God, with all our heart, soul, and mind." (Matthew 22:37) That's our flour. It's combined with "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," Jesus said. (Matthew 22:39)

It is true that with this base, people have made countless numbers of by-products with this gospel flour that have sustained the world.

However, it is easy for churches to get sidetracked and start to turn out products that don't have any Jesus flour in them at all.

As we write our future story, here are some important questions: "Who are we going to invite to come and join us at the Lord's table? Can we reach everyone, or should we focus on certain types of people?"

Let's let the gospel text help us.

We don't have to apologize for having a guest list. Our guest list should include those people God has given us a burden to reach.

It's natural and normal to invite people to our table that we are comfortable being around. These are people we have some affinity with.

When you turn on the radio, how many stations are there that play every genre of music? I can't think of any.

Instead, stations concentrate on playing only one genre of music. If you like Blake Shelton, Rascal Flatts, and Tim McGraw then you will find a country station. If you like Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga or Justin Bieber, then you'll find a station that plays pop.

Even Jesus focused on those of his on Jewish culture most of the time, but please hear me say that the kingdom of God was open for all who became his disciples.

Once a Canaanite woman came to Jesus and asked Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. At first, Jesus ignored her. He told her that his hands were full taking care of the lost sheep of Israel. This was Jesus' target group, the Jewish people in Galilee.

He told the woman it would not be right for him to shift his time to this group to give to people like her, people the Jews referred to as dogs.

But the woman was quick with a reply.

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" Matthew 15:26 (NRSV).

"Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly" (Matthew 15:27-28 NRSV).

Rick Warren in his book, "The Purpose Driven Life," says, "We see Jesus expanding ministry at his table to include other Gentiles in his ministry. It is limited, though. It was not to be exclusive, but it was in order for him to be effective." ("The Purpose Driven Life," Rick Warren, p. 158).

There were limitations on his time and the number of people he could see, touch, and minister to. He focused on those he had the best chance of reaching, but not to the exclusion of others. We see that Paul targeted his ministry to the Gentiles. Peter targeted his ministry to the Jews. Each had a target group. (Ibid)

Zig Ziglar, a famous salesman once said, "If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time." When Matthew became a follower of Jesus, his tax collector friends became his target group. He threw a party and invited them all over to his house and invited Jesus to come to the party. Those were the people Matthew knew. Those were the people in his circle. Those were his friends. So naturally, those were the people he wanted to introduce to Jesus.

As we write our future story, we need to think about the kinds of people we have the best opportunity to reach with the gospel. Those are the people we need to spend the most time inviting to the table without make the table exclusive to others.

Over twenty years ago, Rick Warren wrote that people choose churches primarily based on relationships and programs, not location. (p. 161).

Most of you drove by several churches to get to this one this morning. Why?

Most of you want to be in community with others and most of you want life-changing ministry taking place in your church. You want to be a part of a church that is making a difference in your life, in the lives of the members of your family, and in the lives of others.

As we write our future story, we should think about what is going to propel people to be motivated enough that worship with us and doing ministry with us is worth their time and the drive.

If relationships and ministry bring people here, then we must visualize how we can build strong communities and ministries that people want to come and be a part of.

Children need other children to be their friends and make church fun and a place to learn about Jesus.

Teenagers need other teenagers reaching out to them, forming community and friendships, and helping them discover that being a disciple of Jesus is cool, demanding, and brings joy and peace.

Young families will need other young families who are dealing with the same issues they are. In addition to the church staff reaching out to church prospects, they need you to reach out to them and offer to do life with them and show them the love of Christ.

We need adults that are passionate about ministering to children and teenagers and who feel called to be a significant part of their lives as mentors.

People who are going through grief need other people who have been there to assure them that God will help them find their way.

Adults struggling to raise children, pay bills, stay married, care for aging parents, overcome temptation, need other adults they can trust and confide in. The church is supposed to be that kind of place.

Empty nesters and people entering retirement need others to help them traverse a new landscape and adjust to life without children at home.

Seniors need to learn that they have much to offer in their later years and that they are greatly valuable to the church and that they can still make new friends.

Those taking care of aging parents need support. Spouses taking care of each other in their aging years do as well, especially those who are suffering through the devastating issues of Alzheimer's.

We all need each other.

These are some of the people who will fit here and can be loved here, who will love us, and can find community here.

However, there are some people that are not on anyone's guest list because none of us would ever think about befriending them.

For whatever reason, we look at them, size them up, think about their race, economic level, political stance, sexuality, theology, marital status, or any number of things and we conclude that they will not fit with our people. We might even think, "They will not be open to the gospel."

However, Jesus tells us that while it's O.K. to have a guest list, our church will look more like the kingdom of God if we expand it.

Jesus says, "Invite others to the table. Compel them to come in."

His rich table of blessings has been prepared for everyone and none are prohibited from coming if they will humble themselves and receive the blessings prepared by the Master.

This is a radical love that we understand theologically, but we sometimes have problems putting it into practice.

Perhaps in our future story we will aspire to be a church that is diverse in every way. How might our future church look more like the kingdom of heaven?

The only way that will ever happen will be for us to become like the servants who had no problem going into the city streets and alleys, trying to find the misfits and homeless, going down country roads and compelling people to come to the table prepared by the Master.

In more realistic language it means that we actually have to reach out to people and become friends with those who are different from us because it is through relationships that people know that we care and love them.

People will find community with us only if they know us or if they believe that we care about them.

Can you imagine a future story like that?

Paul envisioned it when he wrote: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28).

Picture Jesus sitting at the head of the table. You are at the other end. On one side of the table there are two or three guests. These are prospects for our church. Perhaps they are your neighbors. They could be personal friends of yours. These are people who do not have a church home. They may or may not have a relationship with Jesus. They are people who you can easily talk to and be around. These are people you think of as "church-going" people. These are people who you know. These are "Guest List" people.

Now on the other side of the table are those Jesus has compelled us to bring in. These are people who would take some compelling to become Jesus followers. These are people that are either resistant to the gospel or you've never thought to ask about their relationship with Jesus because you just assumed that topic might be uncomfortable.

Perhaps you never had the courage to ask or never thought they'd be interested in your church or your Jesus. You might know their names or you might not. You may just be thinking about a person that fits a category. You might just be thinking about a type of person that fits this category.

Do you have these two groups in mind?

Now, think about this. If there are 150 people in our worship services today and we all thought about four names, that's about 600 names. What if 10% of those people came to Christ in the next 5 years?

I doubt the Sharks would think those were very good returns. However, we live in a world that is filled with things a worse than sharks. Evil is all around us. Evil will eventually separate us all from God. We all need to be inviting people to the Lord's table. How else will they know of His love?

People are looking for peaceful waters.

Do we love our people enough to reach out and offer them a lifeline?

As you come to the Lord's table today, come with this image in mind, that Jesus has invited you to the table. What a privilege that is to receive the bread and the cup, symbolizing his body broken for us, his blood shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins!

As you come, think about who is on your guest list. Who should you be inviting to join Jesus at this table?

Not only do we need to do away with the excuses of not coming to the table ourselves, but also of the excuses of not bringing others with us.

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