

Leader Preparation Guide

Why Does He Eat With Sinners?

Movement One: Trust and Friendship · Mark 2:13-17; Luke 15:1-2; Luke 19:1-10

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

Discover, from the order of events in Mark 2, that Jesus established table fellowship before Mark narrates any repentance, restitution or reform, that this was the specific thing that scandalized the religious, and that the proximity was itself part of the healing rather than an endorsement of anything.

Catholic Touchstone

The Church welcomes sinners into her fellowship and her worship without lowering the call to conversion, while admission to Communion remains governed by sacramental discipline. Mercy is not the suspension of the call; it is the way the call gets delivered. Both halves of that sentence have to survive tonight, or the session has failed.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The order of events, which is the argument

Track Mark 2:14-15 precisely. Jesus sees Levi at the tax office and says "Follow me." Levi rises and follows. Then there is a meal, and Mark tells us it is at table "in his house," with many tax collectors and sinners sitting with Jesus and his disciples, "for there were many who followed him."

Call, then table. Nothing in the passage makes repentance the price of admission to that table. Whatever repenting Levi did, Mark places the dinner before he reports any of it.

Then the complaint (v16), and only then the famous saying (v17). The saying is a response, not an opening statement. Jesus is explaining conduct that had already scandalized people.

Why "sinners" undersells it

Tax collectors in first century Galilee were not simply people with a morally awkward job. Levi, working at Capernaum, was most likely a customs agent under Herod Antipas rather than a contractor for Rome directly, and the details of the system varied by place. What is not in doubt is the contempt: it was social, religious and patriotic at once, and it attached to men who made their living from their own neighbours.

When your group reaches for a modern equivalent, let them, but steer away from cheap political point scoring. The useful question is: who is the person whose presence at your parish potluck would make people go quiet? That is the register Mark is working in.

The complaint, and who it is aimed at

Verse 16 is worth reading slowly: the scribes of the Pharisees see him eating with sinners and tax collectors, and they say to *his disciples*, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

They do not ask him. They ask the people around him. This is what usually happens to your group as well: the objection to Christ arrives at the friend, not at Christ, and the friend has to field it.

The physician saying does not deny the diagnosis

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (v17).

Notice what the image concedes. Jesus does not say the accusation is unfair or that these people are fine. He agrees they are sick. He simply points out that sick people are precisely who a physician exists for. The metaphor answers the charge of endorsement without softening the diagnosis by one degree.

Notice also the verb in the second half: he came to *call*. The table is not the end of the story. It is where the calling continues.

Luke turns the accusation into a title

Luke 15:1-2: the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him, and the Pharisees and scribes murmured, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Luke then hangs three parables off that sentence: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. The single greatest chapter in the Gospels exists as an answer to a complaint. The accusation, taken as it stands, is an accurate summary of the Gospel, and Luke knows it.

Zacchaeus, if you have time

Luke 19:1-10 makes the sequence unmistakable. Jesus invites himself ("I must stay at your house today," and the Greek *dei* carries the sense of divine necessity). On the traditional reading the restitution comes later, at verse 8, unprompted, after the welcome. Note honestly that the Greek verbs there are present tense, and a minority of interpreters read Zacchaeus as defending an existing practice rather than announcing a new one.

Keep this in reserve as a Dig Deeper. The group will reach for it on their own once they see the pattern in Mark.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Mercy and not sacrifice

This is tonight's live discovery, so do not spend it in prep. St. Matthew's version of this same scene (Matthew 9:13) has Jesus send the objectors to Hosea 6:6 with the words "Go and learn what this means." He does not answer the objection himself. He assigns homework from the prophets.

The shepherd who goes looking

Ezekiel 34:10-16. God declares himself against the shepherds of Israel and says he will search for the sheep himself, seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the crippled, and strengthen the weak. Luke 15 and Luke 19:10 are both standing on this chapter, and Ezekiel 34:16 is a major Old Testament background to "the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."

The feast prepared for everyone

Isaiah 25:6-8: a feast of rich food on the mountain for all peoples, where death is swallowed up forever. Wisdom sets a table and sends her servants to call the simple in Proverbs 9:1-6. The image of God spreading a feast and calling in the unlikely is not a New Testament innovation.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | St. John Chrysostom on who the Church is for

Preaching on St. Matthew's Gospel, St. John Chrysostom teaches in substance that Christ's answer to the objectors turns the whole charge around: a physician found among the sick is not thereby under accusation; the sick are the reason he came at all.

That much is his. The application this study draws is our own: a person who stays away because they feel unworthy has misunderstood what kind of house it is.

St. John Chrysostom, summarized from his Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew. A faithful summary of his teaching, not a quotation.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | Pope Francis on medicine and prizes

Pope Francis wrote that the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak, and that the Church is not a tollhouse.

Read this alongside what the Church also teaches, because the paragraph is often quoted with the second half cut off. The Church's discipline that a person conscious of grave sin must receive sacramental absolution before communion is unchanged (CCC 1385; and see St. Paul at 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 for the biblical warning about unworthy reception, which is a distinct point). The application of this paragraph is genuinely debated among faithful Catholics. What is not debated is the pastoral posture: no one is refused welcome, pastoral care, or the call to conversion because their life is a mess, even though sacramental discipline remains in force.

Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium 47 (2013), read together with CCC 1385.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | The Second Vatican Council on a Church that holds sinners close

The Council taught that the Church, clasping sinners to her bosom, is at once holy and always in need of purification, and that she constantly follows the path of penance and renewal.

This is the sentence that keeps tonight honest in both directions. It does not say the Church tolerates sin. It says she holds sinners close, and that every one of her members has to reckon with his own need for purification.

Second Vatican Council, Lumen Gentium 8 (1964); see also CCC 827.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

The Catechism handles this scene directly, and its own wording holds both halves together better than most of us manage.

- **CCC 588.** Jesus scandalized the Pharisees by eating with tax collectors and sinners as familiarly as with themselves. The Catechism uses the word scandalized, and so should you.

- **CCC 545.** Jesus invites sinners to the table of the kingdom. Read the whole paragraph out loud if the group starts drifting: it says in the same breath that he invites them to the conversion without which one cannot enter the kingdom.
- **CCC 1443.** Jesus receiving sinners at his table is a sign both of God's forgiveness and of their reinstatement into the People of God. The meal is not incidental to the mercy; it is how the mercy is announced.
- **CCC 1385.** Anyone conscious of grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion; CCC 1457 provides for the narrow grave-reason case. Have this one ready tonight.
- **CCC 2447.** The spiritual works of mercy include instructing, advising, consoling, comforting, forgiving, and bearing wrongs patiently. This is the paragraph the steelman will lean on.
- The parish potluck illustration, and any modern equivalent your group reaches for, is our extension of these paragraphs rather than their wording.

THREAD WATCH

THREAD WATCH | leader only

Thread A, "With him, and sent." Lightly developed: the table in Levi's house is "with him" in the most literal form the study will see. Do not comment.

Thread B, "Whose work is this?" Not in play tonight. Park it if it surfaces.

Thread C, "The room you are afraid of." Developed hard tonight, and this is its most important appearance before Session 8. The question of whose presence would make the room go quiet is the thread in the open. Let it stay uncomfortable and do not resolve it.

Watch for. Someone in your group has a family member living in a situation the Church calls gravely wrong, and tonight is either a great relief or a fresh wound. Notice who goes quiet. Follow up privately during the week, not in the room.

SESSION GOALS

1. Have the group establish the order of events in Mark 2 from the text: call, table, complaint, saying. The order is the argument.
2. Make clear that the physician saying concedes the diagnosis rather than denying it, so nobody leaves thinking Jesus was indifferent to sin.
3. Have the group find Hosea 6:6 behind Matthew 9:13 themselves, and notice that Jesus answers an objection by assigning reading.
4. Work the "friendship without correction is complicity" objection at full strength and land the honest answer: correction is ordinarily heard far better inside a relationship of trust, and that is a claim about receptivity rather than a rule.
5. Move the practice ladder from listening to hospitality: a shared meal this week with no agenda at all.

TIMED PLAN

Minutes	Movement
0:00-0:05	Opening prayer.
0:05-0:12	Field report on rung two, the unhurried conversation.
0:12-0:20	Win questions.
0:20-0:34	Read Mark 2:13-17 aloud. Build 1 and 2.
0:34-0:46	Build 3 and 4, the complaint and the physician saying.
0:46-0:56	Build 5, Luke 15:1-2 and what Luke does with the accusation.
0:56-1:06	Live discovery: Hosea 6:6 behind Matthew 9:13.
1:06-1:20	Build 6, the build-then-press on friendship and complicity. Give this its full time.
1:20-1:26	Send questions.
1:26-1:30	Live It This Week, take-homes, closing prayer.

If you only have 75 minutes, cut these first

- Drop Build 5 (Luke 15:1-2); the take-home recap already carries it. Saves ten minutes. It is the cheapest cut tonight because Mark carries the same point.
- Run the Hosea discovery as a single reading with no hunt. Saves six minutes.
- Skip the Zacchaeus Dig Deeper entirely. It returns in a later module.
- Do not cut the build-then-press. If you are short, cut two Build questions and keep it whole.

IF IT GOES SIDEWAYS

IF IT GOES SIDEWAYS | leader only

If the room turns this into "so the Church should stop teaching X," stop and read CCC 545 out loud, whole. The paragraph does the work for you, and it is better coming from the Catechism than from you.

If the room turns the other way and starts listing who really needs to repent, ask one question and then be quiet: which of the people at Levi's table would you have wanted removed?

If someone discloses something serious about their own life in this session, receive it and move the group on quickly to protect them. Follow up in private within the week, and know where your parish's confession times are before you walk in tonight.

If someone asks a direct question about who may receive communion, answer it plainly with CCC 1385 rather than improvising. Then say you are happy to talk it through afterward, and move on. Do not let the session become a debate about sacramental discipline; it is not tonight's subject and it will eat the hour.

Discussion Guide

Why Does He Eat With Sinners?

Mark 2:13-17; Luke 15:1-2; Luke 19:1-10

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you called a tax collector off his bench and then sat down to dinner in his house with all his friends, and it cost you your reputation. Give us the nerve for that kind of friendship, and keep us from the two easy escapes: pretending nothing is wrong, and standing outside the door being right. Amen.

FIELD REPORT

FIELD REPORT | five minutes, no fixing

Five minutes. Two or three people.

Last week you had one conversation you did not steer. What did you learn about the frame the other person is living inside?

Leader: no names, no advice, no problem solving. If someone says the conversation never happened, that is a normal report in week three. Receive it without comment.

WIN

- ▶ Think of a table you were welcomed at when you did not really belong there. What did it do to you?
- ▶ Who is someone you enjoy, whose life you would not defend? How do you hold both of those at once?

BUILD

Read Mark 2:13-17 aloud. It is short, so read it twice. Tonight the group is going to work the order of events, so the sequence needs to be clear in everyone's head before the first question.

1. Put the events of verses 14 and 15 in order. What happens first, and what has not yet happened when the meal begins?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Jesus sees Levi at the tax office and says "Follow me." Levi rises and follows. Then there is a dinner at table in his house, with many tax collectors and sinners.

Call, then table. Mark reports no repentance, no restitution, and no change of profession before the meal. Whatever Levi later became, the dinner is not waiting on it.

The order is the argument of the whole session. Repentance was not the price of admission to that table. The

table is where the calling continued.

2. Who were tax collectors, actually? Why is "sinners" too mild a word for what the room felt about them?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

They made their living from their own neighbours inside a system of foreign domination, and they were held in religious suspicion as well. Levi at Capernaum was most likely a customs agent under Herod Antipas rather than a Roman contractor; the arrangements varied. The contempt was patriotic, financial and religious at once.

Let the group find a modern equivalent, but do not let it become a political scoring exercise. The sharper question: who is the person whose arrival at your parish potluck would make the room go quiet? That is the register.

3. Read verse 16 slowly. What is the exact complaint, and who do they bring it to?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

The complaint is not about his teaching, his claims, or his miracles. It is "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The objection is to the meal.

And they do not ask him. They ask his disciples. Point that out and let it sit, because it is the situation your group is actually in: the objection to Christ usually arrives at the friend rather than at Christ, and the friend has to field it without notice.

4. Verse 17 is a proverb followed by a mission statement. What does the physician image concede, and what does it refuse?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

It concedes the diagnosis completely. Jesus does not say these people are fine, or that the criticism is unfair, or that the categories of sick and well are unhelpful. He agrees that they are sick.

What it refuses is the inference. Sick people are exactly who a physician exists for, so a physician found among the sick is not thereby under suspicion.

This is the answer to the fear that friendship equals approval, and it is worth saying out loud in those words. Nearness is not endorsement. A physician who avoided sick people would not be principled. He would be useless.

Then notice the verb: he came to *call*. The table is not the destination.

5. Turn to Luke 15:1-2. What is the complaint there, and what does Luke do with that sentence?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

"This man receives sinners and eats with them." It is the same objection, sharpened into a single line.

And Luke hangs the entire rest of the chapter on it: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. The

greatest chapter in the Gospels exists as an answer to a complaint about who Jesus ate with.

Read the accusation again as though it were a creed. It is entirely accurate. His opponents summarized the Gospel better than they knew.

6. St. Matthew tells this same story and adds one line that Mark leaves out. Find Matthew 9:13. What does Jesus do there instead of answering?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

He tells them to go and learn something. He answers a hostile objection by assigning reading from the prophets, and then repeats his mission statement.

The discovery below sends the group to the passage he assigned. Do not do it for them.

LIVE DISCOVERY | let the group find it

Send them to find it.

Jesus says "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." Have someone locate the source: Hosea 6:6. Read the whole verse aloud.

Then have a second person read Hosea 6:4-6 for context, and ask: who is God speaking to in Hosea, and what were they doing wrong?

What they should find: God is speaking to his own religious people, whose love is like a morning cloud, and who are keeping the sacrificial system running while missing the point of it. Jesus does not send his critics to a text about scandalous sinners. He sends them to an oracle that rebukes God's own covenant people for a love that evaporates.

A textual note worth giving them, honestly. In most English Old Testaments Hosea 6:6 reads "steadfast love," translating the Hebrew *hesed*, while Matthew's Greek reads "mercy," following the Septuagint's *eleos*. This is not an error in Matthew. It is the standard Greek rendering of a Hebrew word that English cannot carry in one syllable. If someone in your group is being told that the New Testament misquotes the Old, this is a clean, checkable example of what is actually going on.

7. Someone says: friendship without correction is complicity. If I never tell my friend that what he is doing is gravely wrong, my silence tells him it is fine. Are they right?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Work the build-then-press below. Do not resolve it quickly in either direction; both halves of the answer have to survive.

DIG DEEPER

Zacchaeus, Luke 19:1-10. Jesus invites himself: "I must stay at your house today." The Greek *dei* carries the sense of divine necessity, the same word used of the cross. Then the muttering, then verse 8, then "Today salvation has come to this house." Notice that Zacchaeus is never asked for anything. One honest note: the

verbs in verse 8 are present tense, so while the traditional reading takes it as a new act of restitution, some interpreters read him as defending what he already does. Give the group both.

Ezekiel 34:10-16. God fires the shepherds of Israel and says he will do the searching himself. Luke 19:10, "the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost," stands on that chapter.

BUILD THEN PRESS

Build the objection at full strength:

Build this at full strength. Half of it is true, and the people who hold it are usually holding it because they have watched someone they love walk off a cliff in silence.

Ezekiel 3:18 is not a soft text: if you do not warn the wicked man, he shall die in his iniquity, and his blood God will require at your hand. That is Scripture, and it is addressed to the one who stayed quiet.

Admonishing the sinner is a spiritual work of mercy (CCC 2447). Silence is not neutral. It communicates, and what it usually communicates is that the thing did not matter enough to risk the friendship over.

There is real pastoral damage on this side too. A Catholicism that never says anything produces friends who genuinely believe the Church has no position, and then feel ambushed and betrayed when they discover she does, and that you knew.

And be honest about the self serving version. "I am building trust first" can be a permanent address. Some of us have been on rung one for fifteen years and have called our cowardice patience.

Then press, from the text:

Now press, from the text.

First: the standard never moved. The same Gospel that puts Jesus at Levi's table has him teaching on marriage in Mark 10 and on the interior of the heart in Mark 7. He did not buy the dinner with a discount on the truth, and he is not available as a precedent for anyone who wants to.

Second: look at the order again. Call, table, complaint, saying. Repentance is not the entry fee. In Luke 19 the sequence is even starker: Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus's house, and the restitution arrives afterward, unprompted, at verse 8. The table was not the reward for the change. It was the setting of it.

Third: the physician saying already answers the complicity charge. Jesus concedes the diagnosis. Nearness is not endorsement, and the group should be able to say that sentence back to you.

On the Ezekiel text: read verses 17 to 21, not verse 18 alone. The bloodguilt falls on a man appointed watchman over Israel, and the same passage says that a watchman who warns and is not heeded has saved his own life. The obligation is to sound the warning. The outcome was never his, and it is not yours.

Fourth, and this is the sentence to send them home with: correction is ordinarily heard far better inside a relationship of trust than outside one. That is a claim about receptivity, not a rule: parents, pastors, teachers and prophets legitimately correct people who are not their friends.

So the objector is right that silence is not neutral, and wrong about the timing. Movement One is not a permanent address; it is the first three weeks of thirteen. If a person in your group is using friendship as a reason never to speak, this study is going to come for them in Session 7.

SEND

- ▶ Whose presence at your table would cost you something socially? What would it cost, and with whom?
- ▶ Is there someone in your life for whom you have used "I am building trust" as a way of never getting to anything else? You do not have to answer out loud.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

Rung 3 of the ladder. From listening to hospitality. This week you share a meal, and you pay.

- Keep praying for the three by name, daily.
- Eat with one of the three this week. A real meal or a real coffee, sitting down, an hour if you can get it.
- Go with no agenda at all. No steering, no opening, no plan for how faith might come up. If it comes up, follow it and stay honest.
- Pay. Do not make anything of it.
- Afterward, ask yourself one question: was I with them, or was I working on them? Bring the answer, not the person, back next week.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, they said of you that you receive sinners and eat with them, and they meant it as an accusation. Make it true of us. Give us tables where people who are nowhere near you can sit down and be at ease, and give us the courage, when the time comes, to say the true thing kindly. Keep us from cowardice dressed as patience, and from correction dressed as love. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Mark 2:17

Leader Reference Card

Why Does He Eat With Sinners?

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

Passage	Where and why
Mark 2:13-17	Primary text. Call, table, complaint, and the physician saying, in that order.
Luke 15:1-2	Build 5. The accusation that generates the three parables of the lost.
Matthew 9:13	Build 6 and live discovery. "Go and learn what this means."
Hosea 6:6	Live discovery. Mercy and not sacrifice, addressed to religious people.
Hosea 6:4-6	Live discovery, context. Love like a morning cloud.
Luke 19:1-10	Dig Deeper and the press. Zacchaeus, and restitution arriving afterward.
Ezekiel 34:10-16	Old Testament Roots and Dig Deeper. God takes the searching into his own hands.
Ezekiel 3:18	The objection at full strength. The watchman who fails to warn.
Isaiah 25:6-8	Old Testament Roots. The feast on the mountain for all peoples.
Proverbs 9:1-6	Old Testament Roots. Wisdom sets a table and sends out servants.
Mark 7:14-23; Mark 10:1-12	The press. The same Gospel, with the moral standard undiminished.
1 Corinthians 11:27-29	Voices of the Church. Worthy reception, read alongside CCC 1385.