

Eating with Fallen-Away Christians

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Introduction.

- A. As any good student of the Bible knows, there are times in Scripture when it appears to contradict itself. It will say one thing in one place, and say what is seemingly the opposite in another place. We see a wonderful example of this in two of the most familiar passages in the Bible: John 3:16 and Acts 2:38. One of them says that salvation is based on belief, the other, that salvation is based on repentance and baptism.
- B. The wrong way to deal with apparent contradictions like these is to do what many in the denominational world do here. They place so much stress on John 3:16 in their understanding of salvation that they end up basically dismissing Acts 2:38 and the many other passages that describe the importance of baptism in God's plan of redemption. That's sloppy logic, and worse than that, it actually calls into question the inspiration of Scripture. After all, if we dismiss some portion of the Bible, we're behaving as though it didn't really come from God.
- C. The much better way to deal with these apparent contradictions is to consider them carefully in their contexts and discern the sense in which both passages are true. If Scripture is truly inspired, a genuine contradiction cannot exist. This is easy with the Scriptures on the screen. We understand that salvation is neither about belief only nor about repentance and baptism only. Instead, John 3:16 and Acts 2:38 work hand in hand as parts of what we commonly call God's plan of salvation. They're complementary, not contradictory.
- D. However, there are other passages of Scripture where resolution of an apparent contradiction is not as easy, or perhaps where we have not realized that a contradiction exists. We need to understand and obey the truth there too. Let's look at two of those passages this morning as we study eating with fallen-away Christians.

I. Two Different Verses.

- A. This study needs to begin with a look at two different verses, verses that appear to point in two different directions. We find the first of these verses in Matthew 9:10-11. Here, the Pharisees come to Jesus as He is sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners, and they demand to know why He is doing such a thing. At first glance, we might not see the significance of this passage. We're very used to singing about and discussing Jesus as the friend of sinners, and the Pharisees were known for blasting Jesus every chance they got, especially when He violated one of their traditions. So what's the big deal here?
- B. The big deal here shows up when we understand just who these sinners were. These were not just random, off-the-street Gentiles with whom Jesus was eating. These were Jewish sinners, men and women who were children of Abraham, part of the covenant that God had made with Israel, but who were violating that covenant by ignoring God's word and living a life of evil and sin. By their disobedience, they were a threat not just to the safety of their own souls, but to the safety of the entire Jewish nation. Look at Nehemiah's words to a similar group of people some 500 years earlier in Nehemiah 13:17-18. Nehemiah knew that God's protection of the Israelite nation depended on their obedience to the Law, and that they had been carried into captivity because they chose to violate that Law. When Nehemiah saw Jews who were foolishly once again violating God's law by breaking the Sabbath, he recognized that they were a threat to the continued safety of the returned exiles. The Pharisees knew the score just like Nehemiah did. They knew that their nation would continue to exist only as long as it obeyed God. When they saw irreligious Jews, then, they recognized them as spiritual traitors and shunned them accordingly. And yet, here we see Jesus, not only talking to these dangerous covenant-breakers, but associating with them and eating with them. It's no wonder that they were appalled. As disciples of Jesus, then, this would seem to teach us that we ought to eat with those who break God's covenant today—Christians who have fallen away—because that's what Jesus did.
- C. On the other hand, though, we take a very different lesson from 1 Corinthians 5:11-13. Paul here is writing to the church in Corinth about how they should deal with Christians of their number who were engaged in gross immorality. In this text, he tells them very explicitly that they are not to associate with those people, or even to eat with them. Indeed, they have a responsibility to remove the wicked from among themselves.
- D. There, we find our apparent contradiction. Paul, speaking by inspiration, is commanding the Christians of Corinth not to do the very thing that Jesus did, and Jesus is an approved example if there ever was one. So what gives? Is the Scripture speaking at cross-purposes with itself? Do we need to reject the inspiration of Scripture? Or should we just ignore the problem, pick one alternative, and go with it?

II. Two Different Hearts.

- A. Actually, the true solution is quite different. If we carefully study the contexts of these two passages, we soon come to see why Jesus behaved in a way that Paul appears to condemn. We soon see that we're not dealing with two different sets of rules, but with two different hearts. Look at what Jesus reveals about His heart in Matthew 9:12-13. As always when the Pharisees think they've got Him, Jesus has a powerful rebuttal for their

accusations. He knows that the people He's eating with aren't living right. He knows that they're covenant-breakers. He knows that they're a danger to the Jewish nation. However, He also knows that simply shunning them doesn't do anything to help the nation or to help these lost souls. Jesus is eating with them not despite their sin, but because of their sin, because by His association with them, He hopes to bring them back to God. Do these sinners deserve a second chance? Of course they don't, but Jesus knows that God wants Him to be merciful, not to hold to some rigid form of ritual purity and allow them to be lost. The righteous don't need Jesus—or at least they think they don't need Jesus—so Jesus is eating with the sinners who most need Him. He is entirely motivated by compassion, love for the lost, and desire to please God.

- B. By contrast, look at what Paul says about the hearts of the Corinthians who were eating with sinners in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2. These people were outwardly doing the same thing that Jesus was. They were eating with sinners. However, their mindset was completely different. As Paul describes them, nothing about their hearts resembles the heart of Christ. They aren't sorrowful for the sin of these covenant-breaking brethren. Instead, they are arrogant about it. They're pleased by their great capacity for accepting these sinners in their midst. There's not even a hint in any of this that the Corinthians are encouraging these incestuous reprobates to repent. They're fine with the sin. They don't care any more than the sinners do. That takes us to the final, largest difference. Jesus loved sinners and tried to help them come back to God. These alleged disciples didn't love sinners, and they would have allowed them to continue in sin all the way to hell.
- C. This teaches us, then, that there is no contradiction between these two passages at all. In both cases, God loves the covenant-breaker and wants him to be restored. In both cases, God wants His people to do whatever they can to restore him. Jesus, when He ate with the tax collectors and sinners, was seeking to fulfill God's goals. The Corinthians, when they ate with the man who had his father's wife, had no interest in fulfilling God's goals. They were condemned not for their actions, but for their hearts.

III. What We Should Do About It.

- A. Now that we understand what these two passages are saying, we have to figure out what we should do about it. The first step in this process is to consider our own hearts. We have to ask why it is that we are doing what we are doing. Consider Jesus' thoughts about the heart in Matthew 15:18-20. In the case of eating with the fallen away, as in so many areas of our service to God, it is our hearts that determine whether we are pleasing to Him. Two of us could be sitting down, having the same meal with the same out-of-duty Christian, and yet God could be pleased with you, but displeased with me, because our hearts are different.
- B. We need to ask whose heart we share. Do we share the heart of Jesus, who was merciful to the sinner? Or do we share the hearts of the Pharisees, who avoided the sinner because they had forgotten what loving their neighbor was really about? Do we share the heart of Paul, who understood that disciples of Christ cannot accept evil? Or do we share the hearts of the Corinthians, who embraced the evil in their midst?
- C. Once we've figured out where our hearts are, we need to take the necessary steps to bring our hearts and our actions into conformity with the will of God. The first guidepost that we need to follow in this is God's command to be holy. Among many other places, we find this in 1 Peter 1:15-16. Remember, folks, holiness is about being set apart for God's purposes. It's about being dedicated entirely to doing His will. When the Lord's church begins to accept sin in its midst, it ceases being holy. When we ourselves begin to accept sin personally, we too cease being holy. We become like the salt that Jesus describes in Matthew 5, that has become tasteless and is only good for being thrown out and trampled underfoot.
- D. This tells us, then, that in our dealings with backslid Christians, they have to know where we stand. They have to know that we don't approve of their behavior, and that until they repent, there will always be a wall between them and us. It may be that we ourselves are in the same boat as the Corinthians. It may be that we have a pride problem too, and the only way that we can keep from embracing sin ourselves is to have nothing to do with the sinner at all. It may be, though, that we are like Jesus instead. It may be that we have enough commitment to God that we are able to attempt to save the sinner without accepting his sin. If that's the case, then associating with or even eating with the sinner does not endanger our holiness.
- E. The second thing that we need to remember to do is to love our brother. John describes the importance of this in 1 John 4:20-21. This includes all of our brethren, not merely the faithful ones, and if we love the brother who has fallen away, we will do whatever we can to save him. From the time we first lay eyes on him until the time we leave, one thought needs to be uppermost in our minds. We need to be constantly asking, "What can I say or do to win my brother back?" Friends, the soul of every child of God is precious in His sight because Christ died to save that soul. If we have to invest years or even decades of work to win that soul back for Jesus, we will have eternity to savor the joy of that victory. That means, friends, that like the apostle Paul, we need to be all things to all men that by all means we might save some. Of course, we cannot endanger our holiness or the holiness of the church in this process, but everything else is legitimate and indeed desirable. If it takes talking to a lost brother to bring him back, so be it. If it takes eating with a lost brother to bring him back, so be it. We will be glad for the opportunity to do either if we truly love him.

Conclusion. If you yourself need to return to God, know that He loves you and that He wants you back.