

# Space for All at God's Table

## Brad Jersak

*"The Jesus Way makes space for all at God's table; it enfolds all people as those whom God loves."* —Greg Albrecht

*"It's easy to call people out. It's harder to call them in. But confession is a helpful start."* —Jarrod McKenna

### The Pharisee and the Publican

**T**o some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

—Luke 18:9-14

Oh, those Pharisees. Dastardly Pharisees! Thank God that I'm not like those Pharisees!

Did you see how I did that? To thank God I'm not like the Pharisee is to miss Jesus' point—is to *become* the Pharisee! Just like the self-righteous, pious Pharisee of the parable, we are prone to fall into the same self-

congratulating presumption by identifying ourselves with the publican, glaring back down our noses at the Pharisees. We despise them to prop ourselves up, practicing exclusion and reserving only our place at the table—*just like the Pharisees.*

Christ told this parable, not merely to "call out" the Pharisees for their hubris, but to "call them in" to the Father's table. He has no desire to see anyone—including them—wallow outside in the cold night of religiosity. And neither should we. If we imagine we're better than they are, we become exactly what we hate—it's ironic.

### The Prodigal Son(s)

I speak of the "prodigal sons" (Luke 15:11-32) in the plural advisedly. In some ways, these brothers are as different as Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael or Jacob and Esau. But they also have a lot in common. Both receive their inheritance when the Father divides it between them (vs. 12). Both brothers alienate themselves, "slaving" in their respective fields—the *field of riotous rebellion* and the *field of resentful obedience*. Neither enjoys the warmth and intimacy of the Father's house (vss. 15, 29). Both young men are lost—but



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***Self-righteously condemning someone for being self-righteous and condemning is like being intolerant of intolerance in the name of tolerance.*** Get it?

remember, the Father never thinks of them as anything less than beloved sons. He loves both, grieves for both, and in the end, welcomes both! He runs to the younger son "while he is still a



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long way off” (vs. 20). And he goes out to the field to plead with the older brother (vs. 28).

As the Father excludes no one in the story, Christ excludes no one with whom he shared the parable. Both Father and Son are celebrating the lost being found and pleading for the elder to join in their joy. There’s not a hint of condemnation for either the younger brother or older brother, for the publicans or the Pharisees. Both groups were *“all gathering around to hear Jesus”* (Luke 15:1). All were welcome.

Jesus ate dinner in both Simon the Pharisee’s home (Luke 7:36-49) and Zacchaeus the tax collector’s house. They received him differently, but he honored both nonetheless. And while it’s extremely hard for us, maybe we should too.

### Confessions of a Pharisee

Do you feel more at home with the squeaky-clean folks of good reputation? Or with those on the messy margins? Do you rub shoulders more easily with the up-and-comer or the down-and-outer? Do you relate better to the religious elder or the rebellious sibling? Either way, might we

make space for all those who feel most “other” to us?

After years of ministry at the margins, I find it easier to “let my hair down” with the messy—people with disabilities, addictions or in poverty. I feel comfortable because I meet Christ in them. Their social faux pas, painful relapses or hygiene issues don’t trigger me. I can be myself around them.

Sadly, I also like being seen in their company because it makes me seem noble, hip and “woke” (hipster lingo for socially aware) to my peers. “Woke” people are admired. “Woke” is the new “righteous.” Voila! “Woke” is the new Pharisee!

So, as I’m strutting out my faith, my tattoos and my craft beer, I find my heart cold toward those I judge as more “religious” or “righty-tighty” than me. And there: I’ve done it again.

I can imagine myself as spiritual but not religious—proud of my “freedom in Christ” and my “pure grace” religion: but if I’m self-righteous and condescending toward “those Pharisees,” I’m still enslaved to the religious impulse. I may have switched sides, but I’m still possessed by

the same fundamentalist spirit. And it’s not the Spirit of Jesus.

How will this play out? Now I’m feeling resentful toward those “woke folk” who claim to be progressive but are terrifying in their capacity to exclude or devour those who step out of line. Believe me; I’ve witnessed it. I don’t want to be at their table or make space for them at mine. There, I’ve done it again.

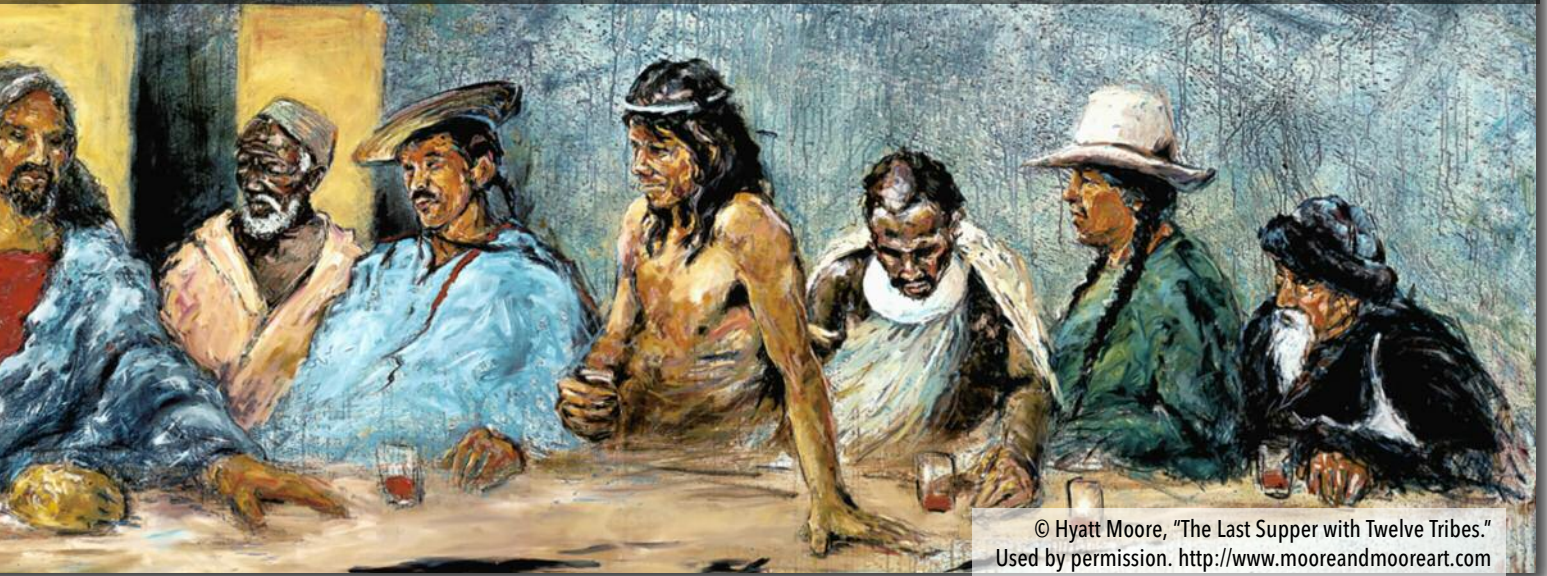
But where do we find Jesus? Again, at a prominent Pharisee’s table. What does Jesus say?

*“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*—Luke 14:12-14

I could just take Jesus literally. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. No problem. After all, Eden and I served in a community where they were our central focus. But I know better. For who is so spiritually poor, blind, crippled and lame



## Enfolding all people as those whom God loves.



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(in my eyes) as the last group I turned away from? I can have a warm conversation with a sex addict or a Muslim Imam, no problem. But a tea-totaling, "straight-edge" Southern Baptist? If not, who's the Pharisee? *Lord, is it I?* It is.

### Moving On, Not Turning Away

When I pronounce "Ichabod" (the glory has departed) on someone else—the Evangelicals of my childhood, for example—I am on trial, not them. My rejection of anyone I've excluded makes me the goat under judgment in Matthew 25, because what I do to anyone (if they're as sick with religion as I claim), I am still doing to Christ. "Brad, Brad, why do you persecute me?"

When I think of how rotten with religion the church can be, do I hope she dies or do I hope she recovers? Do I call her out or call her in? If reconciliation were possible, would I be open to it? Do I thank God I'm not like her, or can I see how I'm exactly like her? She is the measure of *my* transformation towards love.

### Esau's Kiss

There's this tender moment between brothers in the story of Jacob and Esau. After years of estrangement, the younger brother (Jacob) must face Esau, whose inheritance he had stolen. What will happen?

*[Jacob] bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.* —Genesis 33:3-4

When Christ composed the parable of the prodigal son, he borrowed the very same phrase to describe the Father's run, embrace and kiss. Using that phrase in his parable not only shows us the scandalous grace of God the Father—Christ was also exhorting estranged spiritual siblings to that same grace and reconciliation.

### Lloyd Evangelical

Today, it helps me to think of my dad, Lloyd Jersak. Since he met Christ as a teen, he's been a faithful, "soul-winning" Baptist, boldly proclaiming the gospel as

he sees it to all who will listen. He excludes no one, calling in everyone from urine-soaked vagrants to obnoxious fundies to a wider vision God's mercy.

He's old—over 80. Forgetful, too. He's famous for locking his keys in the car. Doesn't hear well. He labors along on bad knees. He's survived a heart attack, valve replacement and three bouts of kidney cancer.

Lloyd also loves playing "Amazing Grace" on his baritone—sometimes while driving gravel roads, other times for street-people on skid row. He took it on himself to lace up his skates and organize a town-wide prayer/skate night in support of Humboldt, Saskatchewan after the hockey bus tragedy.

He's an Evangelical. His virtues, vices and maladies may be a parable of all Evangelicals.

I love him. I hope he lives. And I'm way more grateful to be like him than not. Where I'm not, I don't pray, "Thank God," but "Lord, have mercy on me." He can eat at my table any time. So, there may be hope for *this* old Pharisee yet. □

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