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A
Meal
WITH
Jesus

Discovering Grace,
Community, & Mission
around the Table

TIM
CHESTER

A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table

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Contents

Introduction: The Son of Man Came Eating and Drinking	9
1. Meals as Enacted Grace: Luke 5	17
2. Meals as Enacted Community: Luke 7	37
3. Meals as Enacted Hope: Luke 9	55
4. Meals as Enacted Mission: Luke 14	75
5. Meals as Enacted Salvation: Luke 22	101
6. Meals as Enacted Promise: Luke 24	125
Notes	139

Introduction

The Son of Man Came Eating and Drinking

I fell in love with my wife while she was making me cheese on toast. I'd only known her for a few weeks. It had been "love" at first sight for me, except of course that my initial "love" was mere attraction. No, it was the cheese on toast that won my heart. It wasn't that she could make cheese on toast—I was looking for a little more than that in a wife. But that simple act of service, done without thought to herself (plus her beautiful hands), captured my heart. My response at the time wasn't so reflective. I just knew she was the one for me.

I've now spent more than half my lifetime with the girl who once made me cheese on toast. Half a lifetime of shared meals. I still regard every meal she cooks as a gift. I think I've expressed my appreciation every time. It's not hard work. It's more an involuntary exclamation of delight than a disciplined duty. But it's not just the food. Each meal is an embodiment of her love for me. And for our two daughters. And our many guests. Her love doesn't consist merely in her cooking. But her cooking gives tangible—and edible—form to her love.

Food matters. Meals matter. Meals are full of significance. "Few acts are more expressive of companionship than the shared meal. . . . Someone with whom we share food is likely to be our friend, or well on the

way to becoming one.”¹ The word “companion” comes from the Latin “cum” (“together”) and “panis” (“bread”).

We all have favorite images of good hospitality. I think of my friends Andy and Josie and their farmhouse kitchen: vegetables fresh with garden mud, hot buns with a shiny glaze, warmth from the old stove, and the gentle flow of conversation from which talk of God is never absent for long. “Our life at the table, no matter how mundane, is sacramental—a means through which we encounter the mystery of God.”²

Think about your dining room or kitchen table. What dramas have been played out around this simple piece of furniture? Day by day you’ve chatted with your family, sharing news, telling stories, and poking fun. Values have been imbibed. Guests have been welcomed. People have found a home. Love has blossomed. Perhaps you reached across the table to take the hand of your beloved for the first time. Perhaps you remember important decisions made round the table. Perhaps you were reconciled with another over a meal. Perhaps your family still bonds by laughing at the time you forgot to add sugar to your cake.

In my favorite food writer’s autobiography, Nigel Slater describes how as a boy he once said his mother’s kisses were like marshmallows. When Slater was nine, his mother died, and his father started leaving marshmallows beside his bed each night.³

Food connects. It connects us with family. It turns strangers into friends. And it connects us with people around the world. Consider what you had for breakfast this morning. Tea. Coffee. Sugar. Cereal. Grapefruit. Much of it was produced in another state or country. Food enables us to be blessed by people around the world and to bless them in return.

But hospitality can also have its dark side. I once attended a meeting at the World Bank offices in London. Offered coffee (one of the few things I don’t like), I asked if there was tea. “We don’t serve tea in the

morning,” I was told in a tone dripping with condescension. I had well and truly been put in my place. People like me were not welcome.

But this is a trivial example compared to the race and class prejudices expressed through hospitality or its absence. Nothing bespoke the way the world stood before the civil rights movement more than the “no blacks” signs on restaurant doors. Or the “no blacks, no Irish, no dogs” signs outside lodgings in the UK. Hospitality was just as important in the ancient world. New Testament scholar John Koenig says: “When guests or hosts violate their obligations to each other, the whole world shakes and retribution follows.”⁴

The global connections of trade also have their dark side, as the powerful use their power to exploit the weak. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was sugar and slavery. Today exploitation can be found amidst migrant laborers, subsistence farmers undercut by the dumping of subsidized exports, and workers in food processing plants in economic development zones exempt from labor laws. “An unplowed field produces food for the poor, but injustice sweeps it away” (Prov. 13:23, NIV). The food we purchase enables us to bless others—or curse them.

Our relationship to food is ambiguous. Television chefs have become celebrities, and cookbooks regularly appear on bestseller lists. Yet we cook less than ever before. Americans spend over \$50 billion on dieting each year—\$50 billion to solve the problem of food gone wrong. At any given moment 25 percent of American men and 45 percent of women are dieting. Only 9 percent of college-aged women have never tried to control their weight through dieting. American Christians spend more on dieting than on world missions.⁵ We spend more curing our overconsumption than we do feeding the physically and spiritually hungry of the world. We express who we want to be through food. And when things go wrong, food becomes a place of refuge. The brokenhearted console themselves on the sofa with a tub of ice cream. You are what you eat, people say. Food is so much more than fuel.

How would you complete the sentence: “The Son of Man came . . .”? The Son of Man came . . . preaching the Word . . . to establish the kingdom of God . . . to die on the cross.

Perhaps the question is more revealing if we make it, “We should go . . .”? We should go . . . campaign for political change . . . preach on street corners . . . make the most of new media . . . adapt to the culture we want to reach.

There are three ways the New Testament completes the sentence, “The Son of Man came . . .” “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45); “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10); “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking . . .” (Luke 7:34).

The first two are statements of purpose. *Why* did Jesus come? He came to serve, to give his life as a ransom, to seek and save the lost. The third is a statement of method. *How* did Jesus come? He came eating and drinking.

“Son of Man” is Daniel’s label for one who comes before God to receive authority over the nations (Daniel 7). And now Jesus, the Son of Man, has come. But how does he come? Does he come with an army of angels? Does he come on the clouds of heaven? Does he come with a blaze of glory? No, he comes “eating and drinking.”

The Jews of Jesus’s day would have said the Son of Man will come to vindicate the righteous and defeat God’s enemies. They didn’t expect him to come to seek and save the lost. And they would have said the Son of Man will come in glory and power. They would never have said he would come eating and drinking.

And Luke is not talking about just subsistence eating and drinking. Jesus says: “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (7:34). A glutton, of course, is someone who eats too much, and a drunkard is someone who drinks too much. Jesus was seriously into eating and drinking—so much so

that his enemies accused him of doing it to excess. Earlier in Luke's Gospel the Pharisees and their scribes said to him, "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink" (5:33). Jesus spent his time eating and drinking—a lot of his time. He was a party animal. His mission strategy was a long meal, stretching into the evening. He did evangelism and discipleship round a table with some grilled fish, a loaf of bread, and a pitcher of wine.

Luke's Gospel is full of stories of Jesus eating with people:

- In Luke 5 Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners at the home of Levi.
- In Luke 7 Jesus is anointed at the home of Simon the Pharisee during a meal.
- In Luke 9 Jesus feeds the five thousand.
- In Luke 10 Jesus eats in the home of Martha and Mary.
- In Luke 11 Jesus condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law at a meal.
- In Luke 14 Jesus is at a meal when he urges people to invite the poor to their meals rather than their friends.
- In Luke 19 Jesus invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus.
- In Luke 22 we have the account of the Last Supper.
- In Luke 24 the risen Christ has a meal with the two disciples in Emmaus, and then later eats fish with the disciples in Jerusalem.

Robert Karris concludes: "In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."⁶

Even when Jesus is not eating, references to food abound throughout the Gospel. In Luke 14 Jesus tells a parable of a great banquet. In Luke 15 Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son, which ends with a party. In Luke 16 he contrasts a rich man "who feasted sumptu-

ously every day” (v. 19) with a beggar “who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table.” Luke tells about the women who provided food for Jesus (8:2–3). When asked if few are saved, Jesus warns people to ensure they themselves enter the kingdom, for on the last day people will say, “we ate and drank in your presence. . . .” But “the master of the house” will say, “I do not know where you come from. Depart from me. . . .” Instead, “people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God” (see Luke 13:22–30). In Luke 22 Jesus tells his disciples: “I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom . . .” (vv. 29–30). Food is used to describe salvation and judgment (1:53; 6:21, 25), and people are described in terms of good food and bad food (3:17; 6:43–46; 12:1).

Jesus is called “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” This is why eating and drinking were so important in the mission of Jesus: they were a sign of his friendship with tax collectors and sinners. His “excess” of food and “excess” of grace are linked. In the ministry of Jesus, meals were enacted grace, community, and mission.

So the meals of Jesus represent something bigger. They represent a new world, a new kingdom, a new outlook. But they give that new reality substance. Jesus’s meals are not just symbols; they’re also application. They’re not just pictures; they’re the real thing in miniature. Food is stuff. It’s not ideas. It’s not theories. It’s, well, it’s food, and you put it in your mouth, taste it, and eat it. And meals are more than food. They’re social occasions. They represent friendship, community, and welcome.

I don’t want to reduce church and mission to meals, but I do want to argue that meals should be an integral and significant part of our shared life. They represent the meaning of mission, but they more than represent it: they embody and enact our mission. Community

and mission are more than meals, but it's hard to conceive of them without meals. Peter Leithart says:

For Jesus “feast” was not just a “metaphor” for the kingdom. As Jesus announced the feast of the kingdom, He also brought it into reality through His own feasting. Unlike many theologians, He did not come preaching an ideology, promoting ideas, or teaching moral maxims. He came teaching about the feast of the kingdom, and He came feasting in the kingdom. Jesus did not go around merely talking about eating and drinking; he went around eating and drinking. A lot.⁷

This is a book about meals. But the meals of Jesus are a window into his message of grace and the way it defines his community and its mission. So this book is about grace, church, and mission. But meals are more than metaphor. They embody God's grace and so give form to community and mission. We can't get away from meals.

If I pull down books on mission and church planting from my shelves, I can read about contextualization, evangelism matrices, postmodern apologetics, and cultural hermeneutics. I can look at diagrams that tell me how people can be converted or discover the steps required to plant a church. It all sounds impressive, cutting edge, and sophisticated. But this is how Luke describes Jesus's mission strategy: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking.”

We can make community and mission sound like specialized activities that belong to experts. Some people have a vested interest in doing this, because it makes them feel “extraordinary.” Or we focus on dynamic personalities who can hold an audience and lead a movement. Some push mission beyond the scope of “ordinary” Christians. But the Son of Man came eating and drinking. It's not complicated. True, it's not always easy—it involves people invading your space or going to places where you don't

feel comfortable. But it's not complicated. If you share a meal three or four times a week and you have a passion for Jesus, then you will be building up the Christian community and reaching out in mission.

Let's see how Jesus did it.

The meals of Jesus represent something bigger. They represent a new world, a new kingdom, a new outlook.

Tim Chester brings to light God's purposes in the seemingly ordinary act of sharing a meal—how this everyday experience is really an opportunity for grace, community, and mission. Chester challenges contemporary understandings of hospitality as he urges us to evaluate *why* and *who* we invite to our table. Learn how you can foster grace and bless others through the rich fare being served in *A Meal with Jesus*.

“It fed my soul. In fact, this book is a sumptuous meal in its own right. Buy it, not just to read it, but to feast on it.”

Steve Timmis, cofounder, The Crowded House

“My convictions about how the gospel informs all of life and relationships went deeper, and my affections for Jesus grew stronger. I want everyone in my church to read this book.”

Jeff Vanderstelt, Pastor, Soma Communities;
Vice President, Acts 29

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