

Table Fellowship in the Mediterranean basin (1st Century)

“One distinctive feature of Jesus’ ministry was his practice of a radically inclusive and non-hierarchical table fellowship as a central strategy in his announcement and redefinition of the inbreaking rule of God.”¹

The Significance of Shared Meals

The significance of table fellowship for the cultures in the Mediterranean basin cannot be overestimated in the first century. Sharing a meal with someone was richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy and unity.

Betrayal or unfaithfulness toward anyone with whom one shared a table was particularly reprehensible.² If one was estranged because of an offense, an invitation to the meal was a sign of reconciliation.

In practice, the sharing of a meal was very exclusive and followed strict boundaries. The most common boundaries that defined the table were:

- The extended family - The most common context for the shared meal was the family. It reinforced the sense of being an integral member of a group.
- Social class - social classes were well defined in the first century. One did not share a meal with someone of a lower class. People invited their social, religious and economic equals, that is, those who were in a position to return the favor in a relationship of balanced reciprocity. (see Jesus’ parables of banquets in Luke 14)
- Hierarchical strata - within the meal, seating was according to the order of importance and status of each guest.
 - Jesus challenged this norm by washing the disciple’s feet at a meal (Jn 13)
 - It was in the context of table fellowship that James and John requested to be seated at places of honor in the kingdom (Mk 10:37) which raised indignation toward them among the disciples. Jesus uses this scenario to redefine “greatness” in the kingdom: “...whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant” (Mark 10:43).
 - The topic of who was greatest among the disciples came up *again* at the table at Passover (i.e. the Last Supper). Jesus patiently instructs them: “For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” (Lk 22:27).

¹ S.S. Bartchy “Table Fellowship” *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p796

² The fact that this cultural norm was so ingrained in the disciple’s thinking gives light to their completely missing the identification of Judas as the betrayer at the Last Supper (Jn 13:21-30). Such an act was unthinkable to those who enjoyed such intimate table fellowship as Jesus and his disciples.

- Religious affiliation - The Pharisees in particular would not eat with anyone they considered “unclean.”
 - Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:11-12)
 - Jesus did not ceremonially wash his hands before a meal with a Pharisee (Lk 11:37-38). The Pharisee was “surprised”³ (NIV) at this. Jesus responded with the pronouncement of several “woes” on the Pharisees and teachers of the Law beginning with the sin of hypocrisy.
 - Jesus’ disciples did not ritually wash their hands before a meal and the Pharisees were offended (Mt 15:1-2; Mk 7:1-5). Jesus taught that it is not external ritual which makes one clean but what is in the heart. It is more important that one treats other with mercy (a reflection of the heart). The disciples, notably, miss this completely and need further instruction (Mk 7:17-19).
 - Peter was criticized for eating with Gentiles (Acts 11:1-3)
 - Paul criticized Peter for breaking table fellowship with the Gentiles (Gal 2:11-16)

Inclusive table fellowship of Jesus

- “There is a high level of scholarly agreement that Jesus practiced a radically inclusive table fellowship as a central strategy in his announcement and redefinition of the in-breaking rule of God.”⁴
- Jesus was accused of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” (Mt 11:19)
- Jesus challenged the social norm of reciprocity (i.e. that you show kindness and generosity to those who will return the favor) and encouraged an inclusive “disinterested kindness” (i.e. showing mercy, kindness and generosity to those who cannot repay)
 - **Matthew 5:46-47** ⁴⁶ "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"
 - **Matthew 9:13** ¹³ "But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

³ The Greek word translated “surprised” is θαυμάζω which means: marvel, wonder, be amazed (Strong’s). This same word is used to describe the reaction of the disciples when Jesus calmed the storm (Lk 8:25).

⁴ *ibid.* p797