

Matthew 11:19

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say,
Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of
publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

Analysis

'The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.' In stark contrast to John's asceticism, Jesus participated normally in social life—attending feasts (John 2:1-11, Luke 7:36-50, 14:1-24, 19:1-10), eating and drinking with various groups including notorious sinners. Yet critics accused Him of gluttony and alcoholism—charges as false as those against John. Jesus's point: the same people rejected both John's asceticism and His normal social participation. The real issue wasn't behavior but hardness of heart. They rejected God's messengers regardless of how those messengers lived. The phrase 'friend of publicans and sinners' was meant as insult but became beautiful truth: Jesus genuinely befriended outcasts, demonstrating God's grace. Reformed theology sees this as the incarnation's scandal: God entered fully into human life, associating with sinners (while remaining sinless, Hebrews 4:15) to save them. Critics misconstrued His gracious condescension as moral compromise.

Historical Context

Tax collectors (publicans) were Jews who collected taxes for Rome—considered traitors and extortioners. 'Sinners' included prostitutes, criminals, and the ritually unclean—'people of the land' (am ha'aretz) whom Pharisees avoided. Jesus's table fellowship with such people was scandalous: shared meals signified acceptance and fellowship. Rabbis taught that eating with sinners conveyed ritual impurity.

Jesus deliberately broke these barriers, demonstrating that the gospel welcomes the outcast and transforms sinners. Luke records specific instances: eating with Levi/Matthew (Luke 5:29-32), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), Simon the Pharisee's house where a prostitute anointed Him (Luke 7:36-50). In each case, religious authorities criticized His associations. Yet these associations demonstrated the gospel: Christ came to call sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13), not to maintain comfortable distance from them. The early church struggled to maintain this balance: welcoming sinners without condoning sin, showing grace without compromising holiness.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How do you balance Jesus's example of befriending sinners with the biblical call to holy living and separation from sin?
2. What groups of 'publicans and sinners' do Christians today tend to avoid or judge rather than welcome as Jesus did?
3. How does this verse challenge both legalistic avoidance of sinners and antinomian tolerance of sin?

Interlinear Text

ἦλθεν	ὁ	υἱὸς	τοῦ	ἄνθρωπος	ἐσθίων	καὶ	πίνων	καὶ
came	G3588	The Son	G3588	a man	eating	But	drinking	But
G2064		G5207		G444	G2068	G2532	G4095	G2532
λέγουσιν	Ἴδού,	ἄνθρωπος	φάγος	καὶ	οἰνοπότης			
they say	Behold	a man	gluttonous	But	a winebibber			
G3004	G2400	G444	G5314	G2532	G3630			
τελωνῶν	φίλος	καὶ	ἁμαρτωλῶν	καὶ	ἐδικαιώθη	ἡ		
of publicans	a friend	But	sinners	But	is justified	G3588		
G5057	G5384	G2532	G268	G2532	G1344			
σοφία	ἀπὸ	τῶν	τέκνων	αὐτῆς				
wisdom	of	G3588	children	G846				
G4678	G575		G5043					

Additional Cross-References

Luke 19:7 (Sin): And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.

Luke 14:1 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him.

Proverbs 17:24 (Parallel theme): Wisdom is before him that hath understanding; but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth.

Luke 7:29 (Righteousness): And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John.