

Luke 15:1-2

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/luke/luke-15/luke-151-2/>

The people were coming to Jesus, especially the tax collectors and sinners who resonated with His inviting message of belonging and repentance. The overly legalistic Pharisees and scribes were slandering Jesus for mingling with these people whom they had rejected.

It appears there is no direct parallel gospel account describing this particular encounter, but similar exchanges can be found in Matthew 9:9-13 and Luke 9:34-50.

The people were drawn to Jesus's teachings (Luke 14:25). Among those most attracted to what He said were the social outcasts like *the tax collectors and the sinners*. Jesus did not condemn *them*. He had compassion for *them* (Matthew 9:36). Jesus offered *them* an invitation to repent and participate in His kingdom,

“Truly I say to that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you [religious leaders].”
(Matthew 22:31b)

Jesus's message of inclusion and belonging resonated with their weary souls. And Luke writes that *all* of them, *the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Jesus to listen to Him*. It seems they were starved for acceptance amidst a religious order that had largely rejected *them*.

The *tax collectors* were men like Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9) who were Jews who cooperated with Rome in its subjugation of Israel. *Tax collectors* were hated because they were seen as traitors to God and their Jewish heritage. Their collection of taxes for the Roman Empire supported the occupying power of pagan Rome at the literal expense of their Jewish brethren. In addition to their Roman affiliation, *tax collectors* were widely believed to extort and overcharge the people for their own profit. This general view is supported by the testimony of Zacchaeus, who vowed to pay back anyone whom he had defrauded (Luke 19:8).

Sinners were people who lived in open disobedience to God's commands and the teachings of the religious leaders. It was a term that included prostitutes and the adulterers who visited them. *Sinners* were people on the fringes of Jewish society. Perhaps it included Jews who occasionally participated in the pagan practices maintained by Greeks and Romans. The lifestyle of these *sinners* fell far below the socially acceptable moral standards of *the Pharisees and scribes*.

Sinners and tax collectors were not welcome to participate in the synagogues (gathering places) of *Pharisees*. *The Pharisees* refused to have anything to do with these people and they shunned anyone else who did.

The Pharisees were the keepers and promoters of the Jewish moral culture. They led and taught in the local synagogues. They were seen as the champions and exemplars of the Jewish faith. *The*

Pharisees strictly followed their and *the scribes'* interpretations of the Law and the Tradition. And they crushed anyone who failed to follow their rules or dared defy them.

The scribes were religious lawyers. They were meticulous about the moral codes prescribed by the Law (the Old Testament scriptures, especially the Books of Moses) and the Tradition (the Jewish “Mishnah” a written record of the oral teachings of Rabbis extending to Moses that was developed and codified after the Babylonian exile). *The scribes* searched the Law and the Tradition to create loopholes for themselves while simultaneously creating a litany of rules which they applied to control the people.

When the Pharisees and scribes saw how *all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Jesus to listen to Him*, they *began to grumble* and criticize Jesus.

They began to slander Jesus as a sinner in His own right and denounce *Him* as a false teacher. They were *saying*, “*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” Their not-so-subtle implication was that no righteous person would do such a thing. Anyone who was righteous, or from God, would know better than to have fellowship *with tax collectors and sinners*. Their message to the Jews was clear: “Follow this man and you will risk being kicked out of our synagogues and join *the sinners.*”

But they were wrong. Jesus was not a sinner or a false teacher. He was the Messiah, the Son of God. And He came to save everyone—including *tax collectors and sinners*. Jesus despised their legalistic rules (Luke 16:15) which were designed to empower the *Pharisees* to exploit others. Their rules actually prevented the people from entering His kingdom (Matthew 23:13). Jesus would not let their legalism hinder Him from fulfilling His mission (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus responded to these slanders from the *Pharisees and scribes* with three parables.

1. “The Parable of the Lost Sheep” (Luke 15:3-7)
2. “The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
3. “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32)

Biblical Text

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. ² Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”