

“Joy in Heaven”

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1-2).

The goal of preaching and, in fact, the very purpose of God’s Word, is to be able to announce to repentant sinners that, in Christ, they have been forgiven and accepted by God and that, in Jesus, there is joy in heaven over them. And the greatest challenge a preacher face is dividing God’s Word properly and then applying it to people in the way they personally need to hear it. It’s been said that a good sermon should afflict the comforted and comfort the afflicted and I know that every time I preach, the congregation is made up of both audiences.

It’s important that you don’t misunderstand what I’m saying here; every ear that hears a sermon is tainted by sin – that fact is non-negotiable – but not every sinner comes to church with a repentant heart. Some of the people to whom I preach are very comfortable in their sin and completely content with their rejection of God’s Word and, for them, the Word of God should be a mirror that sticks their sin back in their face; a hammer that shatters their false sense of security and leaves no room for self-righteousness and no path of escape. To the comfortable and unrepentant sinner, the prospect of judgment and ultimately hell is very real and the preacher’s task is to make this sinner uncomfortable and remove any illusion that they can get to heaven while holding on to their sin.

But every time I preach there is also another group of sinners present and this group of sinners is well-aware of what they’ve done and how they’ve rejected God. They often are dealing with the brokenness and mess that their own sin has wreaked on their lives and they stand before the Lord as desperate beggars, starving for mercy they know they don’t deserve. These sinners are exactly where God wants them and these sinners are exactly why Christ went to the cross and the message they need to hear and the message that I’m bound to proclaim is a message of absolute grace; of forgiveness with no strings; of salvation and eternal life because Jesus has taken the punishment for their sin and, for Christ’s sake, God sees them as righteous in every way.

When I’m standing here ready to preach it’s difficult if not impossible to know who’s who and yet it’s an absolute certainty that each week as I look out into the congregation I’m always speaking to both groups. The weight of this fact is daunting and the scenarios I just described are exactly what we see in today’s Gospel reading. In the opening verses of today’s text, Luke tells us that there were two distinct groups of the people listening to Jesus’ words and the contrast between the two couldn’t have been more dramatic.

One of the groups was made up of tax collectors and “sinners.” These were people who had clearly violated God’s Law, in fact, tax collectors were some of the most hated people in Jewish society. They had partnered with the Roman government and used the power that came with this unholy alliance to extort money from their own people. They were sell outs, they were traitors and they were as hated as anyone in society. The other people that Luke mentions in verse one, were “sinners.” Based on what I said a few minutes ago, you might look at that word and think, “What’s the big deal? We’re all sinners.” And that’s certainly true, but here this word means something more. In the NIV we find this word in quotation marks because it’s a label meant to identify people who were “public sinners” whose acts of rebellion had expelled them from the Jewish religious system and rendered them beyond saving in the eyes of the church leaders. Tax collectors and “sinners.” Both groups were despised, both were seen as outsiders who by their own disobedience had removed themselves from God’s people. And here in verse one, these religious rejects were “gathering around to hear” Jesus.

The language Luke uses here is important because at the end chapter fourteen, in the verse that appears just before today’s text, on the heels of His hard and demanding teaching about the cost of discipleship, Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 14:35). In chapter fourteen, Jesus had called His audience to total commitment, to turn from the earthly things that had taken priority over their relationship with God, to repent, to carry the cross and to follow Him, and He concluded this lesson in discipleship by saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Then, in the very next verse, Luke tells us that the “the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to *hear*.” The outcasts, the rebels, the disobedient had turned their ears and hearts to Jesus and they were hearing God.

But they weren’t the only ones in the audience. Also present was a second group people made up of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. These were the elite, these were men considered to be models of righteousness and where Luke tells us that the first group was gathered to hear, this group of self-righteous religious leaders “grumbled.” It’s important to understand the meaning of this verb. The Pharisees and teacher of the law weren’t simply whispering to one another with their hands up to their mouths so no one could read the hate on their lips. No, this word meant that they were publicly

protesting what they saw as an obvious violation of their social and religious rules. You see, in their minds the Law clearly forbade this kind of open exchange with unclean people like the tax collectors and sinners. In fact, their rules were so rigid that they were prohibited from dealing with this kind of person even to teach him the Law. Think about that! Their disdain for these people was so great that, in their eyes, they were beyond saving. They were damned. They were worthless. They were lost. The Pharisees and teachers of the law did not approve of what Jesus was doing and they wanted everyone there to know it. So in their indignation, and so everyone could hear, they muttered and grumbled and sneered, “*This man!* This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In response to the obvious disgust of the religious leaders, Jesus tells one of the most beautiful and comforting parables in all of Scripture. “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’”

The language of sheep and shepherds would have been well-known to this audience. Throughout the Old Testament this imagery was used to describe God’s love for His people and as Jesus drew on these ideas for His parable there’s no doubt that His audience would have recalled Psalm 23 where David wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...” or Isaiah 40 where the prophet said that God “tends his flock like a shepherd... gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (Isaiah 40:11). Even the words of today’s first reading echo this theme as Ezekiel writes, “I will save my flock and they will no longer be plundered.” And as Jesus taught, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law certainly would have thought of themselves as the shepherds to whom Jesus was referring; protecting the purity of the flock; guarding the helpless people against the unclean outsiders...that is, until Jesus concluded the parable. “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do no need to repent.” In those words, Jesus turned the spotlight on the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, and these men who considered themselves to be “the righteous” would have been shocked to hear such a message.

Jesus spoke of God in ways that they had simply never considered. They could understand a God that would deal with someone who *came to Him*...but this was a totally different teaching! Here Jesus was talking about a *seeking* God, a God who takes the initiative, a God who pursues the sinner and restores him back to the flock. This was the story of a shepherd who searches for the lost and there was no framework for them to consider a God who goes after sinners. When the Pharisees and teachers of the law had said, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” they had meant it as a rebuke, but in reality their harsh words were the perfect description of the Shepherd who stood in their midst!

As we consider the words of this parable and what they mean for our lives today, we need to recognize ourselves in the Pharisees and teachers of law. We need to honestly and humbly confront the sin in our own lives, because we are just as guilty of the pride and self-promotion that we see in this reading. And we are just as guilty of judging and controlling and worrying about the behavior of others, all the while ignoring our own damning sins. Whether it’s based on economic, racial, social or religious differences, we have all taken part in creating the kind of division we see in Luke 15 and today, we need to be honest about that! We need to take responsibility for who we are and for what we’ve done...we need to repent, because, dear brothers and sisters, when we repent...when we allow the Holy Spirit to afflict and break our hearts...when we stop fighting the searching Shepherd...when we see things for what they truly are...*when we repent*...Jesus tells us that there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God!

Don’t miss the significance of this statement! There are just a few times in the Bible when we hear about the angels of God rejoicing. In Job 38, as God challenges Job with a description of creation He says, “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation... while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4, 7). And in the story of Jesus’ birth Luke writes, “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’” (Luke 2:13-14). Finally, in the book of Revelation, John paints a picture of the victory party in heaven as he writes, “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’” (Revelation 5:11-12). At the birth of the world, the angels of God sang for joy. At the birth of the savior, the angels of God sang for joy! At the birth of the life of the world to come, the angels of God will sing for joy!! And when one sinner repents, the angels of God sing for joy!!!

The words of this parable are words of joy. They are the words of a Shepherd who searches out the lost; they are words of a Savior who seeks sinners; they are words of a God who wants nothing more than to bring His people home and who died to do it. Repent! Believe! And know that, today, there is joy in heaven over you. Amen.

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