

God's Heart for Sinners

Luke 15:1-7

It's good to be back after being gone for a couple of Sundays on a family vacation and another trip out to MN to visit family. I miss being here and it's so good to be together. I'm excited to continue preaching through the book of Luke for a few more weeks before shifting gears and doing a fall sermon series. This morning we will be in Luke chapter 15 which takes place a few months before Jesus' death on the cross while he's doing ministry with his disciples in the region of Perea.

This chapter contains three popular parables that Jesus gave to a group of religious leaders when they brought a complaint against him for eating with sinners. We're going to look at the first one this morning.

As we begin, I want you to try to think back to the time when you first experienced the joy of your salvation. The time when you could clearly see what Jesus did for you on the cross, and knew in your heart that your sins were forgiven, when you felt the guilt and shame lifted and you felt a deep love for God. For some of you, that might have happened when you first became a Christian, for others, it may have come later, and hopefully you've been able to experience that joy and love and freedom many times as you walked along since then.

I first experienced that on a Sunday morning at church back when I was 14 years old. I had grown up in church and knew the Bible Stories. I understood that Jesus died on the cross for my sins and that I had to trust in him for salvation and I had prayed the sinners prayer many times. But I was living a double lifestyle – showing my parents and the people at church one thing, but being totally different when I was at school and with my friends. I was aware of my hypocrisy and feeling the weight of guilt until that one Sunday morning when the veil was lifted during the pastor's sermon and I experienced God's grace and forgiveness for the first time. It was a life-changing experience for me. I no longer wanted to live a life of deception, but I wanted to live for God. I felt his love for me and my love for him and I wanted to live in a way that was pleasing to him.

When you're living in that joy, you want to please the Lord and live for him. It's a strong desire and easy to do because that's what you're passionate about. But

one of the things that can happen as time goes on is we can lose that joy and start to live under the weight of obligation. Our relationship with God turns into the practice of religion, and we feel like God will only be pleased if we maintain a certain standard of morality and devotion. So we try to discipline ourselves and follow the rules, and sometimes we do a good job and feel better about ourselves, but sometimes we fail and we feel terrible. We get stuck in a rut of religion and we lose the joy of our salvation.

That's what happened to me later in high school and college. I was always trying to live up to God's standard, but I was weak and felt like I could never measure up. I didn't pray enough or read my Bible enough or memorize enough Scripture. I didn't reach out to the lost enough or give enough. It always felt like I was failing, but I just kept trying. I was stuck in the rut of religion and had lost the joy of my salvation. And it's easy for any of us to do. Maybe you've been feeling that way recently. My hope is that our passage for this morning will help us shake off the shackles of religion and recapture the joy of God in the truth of the gospel.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day believed that if they followed his commands to the highest degree, he would be pleased. That's what God was all about to them – watching them to see if they obeyed his rules. So they followed the rules and taught others to do the same. They also believed that anyone who didn't do that was to be rejected and condemned. Those who lived that way were to be despised and avoided.

But when Jesus came, he didn't walk in agreement with them, and it really confounded them. He was actually a friend to those people rather than shunning them. They couldn't understand how someone who was supposed to be a rabbi and maybe even the promised Messiah could do what Jesus was doing. Today we are going to hear him explain why. It's a beautiful explanation of the gospel and who God is that I hope will take root deep in our hearts, rekindle our passion for him, and compel us to be more fully his.

Luke 15:1-2

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Here we find the context for the parables in this chapter, and the context is key for understanding the meaning behind them. Jesus is in Perea, a region of Israel under the religious influence of the scribes and Pharisees, much like Judea. And it says that the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

At that time, when someone referred to tax collectors and sinners, they were talking about a certain class or category of people in that society who were despised and shunned because they didn't follow the religious rules of the scribes and Pharisees like everyone else. They were known for immorality and disobedience and for being irreligious. They didn't worship at the synagogue and weren't allowed to. They likely didn't observe Sabbath days or other feasts and holy days. They didn't follow dietary laws, or other laws for ritual purity. They were the outcasts in the Jewish community and the ones that most people looked down on and despised.

But they were drawing near to Jesus. He was different than the other religious leaders and he was welcoming them and even eating with them, which was a big deal. He was associating with and befriending sinners. This was appalling to the scribes and Pharisees. I learned that in the original Greek, the words used in their complaint in verse 2 are filled with derision, like they were saying, "*This fool receives sinners and eats with them.*" They were disgusted.

They followed very strict rules when it came to what company they kept and who they ate meals with. According to NT scholar, Kenneth Bailey, they believed that they had to remain isolated from such people in order to maintain ritual purity before God. Eating with sinners had the same effect as coming into contact with a leper or even a dead body. So they didn't have any dealings with them, they didn't care about them and despised them. They only had time for those who fell in line with their religion.

So, they had a major problem with what Jesus was doing and complained about it. There are three or four times in the gospel accounts where you see similar complaints brought up in different regions by different religious leaders. Wherever Jesus went, he was known for befriending sinners and the scribes and Pharisees always had a problem with it.

It's because of this contrast that Jesus spoke 3 parables – stories that explained why he did what he did. The first is about a lost sheep.

Luke 15:3-7

So he told them this parable: ⁴ “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

So Jesus puts them in the position of a shepherd who has lost a sheep. After a long day of grazing, a shepherd would count his sheep to make sure all were accounted for. This shepherd did so and found that 1 sheep was missing. 99 had followed the rules and stayed in line, but one had strayed and been lost. The sheep represent the people of Israel. The 99 are those who were religious and followed the rules, the 1 represents the “sinners” who had wandered off.

Before we go further, I want us to think about, if the shepherd acted like the Pharisees in this story, what would he do? How would this story be different? In that case, the shepherd would do nothing. He would stay with the sheep who followed the rules and he would despise the one that wandered off. “That sheep is worthless. It wandered off and deserves to die.” That’s what they assumed God’s attitude was toward sinners. They were worthless and deserved to die. “Alcoholics, drug addicts, sexually immoral, greedy, prideful, partiers, gamblers, gays, lesbians... Let them die. We’re going to stay with the people who follow the rules.”

Is that right? Is that what God thinks about sinners? That’s what religion thinks. But what if God thought that way about you? If I wasn’t dead, I’d be wandering through life, fixated on self-glory and self-indulgence, and utterly miserable. I’d be a train wreck, leaving behind a wake of brokenness and suffering.

I’m so glad God is not like that. Because God is like the shepherd in this story. Jesus is the shepherd in this story. In the story, the shepherd finds out he’s missing 1 sheep – 1 sheep wandered off and didn’t obey the rules. And rather

than despising it for getting out of line, he has compassion. That sheep is precious to him. He doesn't ignore it or leave it alone to see if it might wander back to him and fall in line, he goes out into the darkness and searches until he finds it. And when he does, he's so delighted that he lays it across his shoulders and carries it home. When he gets there, he calls all his friends and neighbors together and has a celebration.

This is a story about Jesus and what he does for each one of us. This is a story about the heart of God and the gospel and why God has not left sinful humanity to go to hell in a handbasket. This is a story about why God intervened – why he sent Jesus to go through the horror of the cross. Why he didn't just sit on his throne in heaven and wait for us to crawl our way back to him. Because despite all our best efforts and all the attempts of religion, no matter how good a person follows the rules, we are still guilty. We still have sin on our record and in our hearts and we're still separated from God no matter how many religious rules we follow. None of us can save ourselves. We need a Savior. We need our Shepherd to come find us.

Religion blinds us to that reality and convinces us we can be good enough to save ourselves – that's what the scribes and Pharisees believed and that's the lie they had been teaching the people of Israel for generations. But the sinners in Jesus' day weren't under that deception. They knew they were lost. They were reminded of it every day when they were despised and shunned by the religious leaders and the rest of society. But then Jesus came – a man of God who did wondrous miracles and spoke with authority but actually cared about them and invited them to follow him. Yes, to leave their lives of sin behind, but not to try to earn their way back to God, it was to leave death behind and find life.

That's why Jesus did what he did. He came to call people to life and salvation, not empty religion. And for each sinner who came a lost sheep was found and there was great rejoicing in heaven. Jesus said, that's what happens when one of those sinners he was eating with and showing kindness to turns away from their life of wandering and sin to follow him. God isn't delighted in a bunch of people who don't think they need him because of their religion, but he is delighted with every single person who recognizes they're lost and responds to his rescue. They are precious to him, valuable, loved, and sought after.

That's God's heart. And it isn't just that way when we first become a Christian, it's that way every day – it's that way today. He wants us to experience the glory of his grace and mercy everyday and live in it, not thinking that we need or have to earn his approval, that's not what he's looking for. He wants us to know him and love him and live out of that love.