

THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS – LUKE 15:1-10

PASTOR COLIN RIEKE ~ SEPTEMBER 15, 2013

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.” Then Jesus told them this parable: “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? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 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 not need to repent. “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Names that are meant to mock often turn into badges of honor. Nearly a hundred years ago, a company that processed and canned meat sponsored a football team. The fans of a rival team in Chicago would often taunt that team and its fans with cries of, "You stink! You're a bunch of meat... (wait for it)...packers. But today millions of people across the globe are proud to call themselves Packer fans.

Acts 13 tells us that that same thing happened in the city of Antioch. Unbelievers came up with a name to mock believers. They called them...(wait for it)...Christians. But that name became a badge of honor. Today nearly a billion people proudly call themselves Christians. The same thing happened 1,500 years later, when people wanted to mock that new church which based its teachings on the Bible alone. They began to call the members of that church...(wait for it)...Lutherans. But today millions of people across the globe are proud to call themselves Lutherans.

A similar event surrounded the life of our Savior Jesus. A name that was meant to mock, he turned into a badge of honor. One time when he was eating with the less desirable crowd, several Pharisees and other religious leaders found fault with him by saying that, “THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS!” But what they had meant as an insult to Jesus, he took it as a badge of pride, THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS!

(1)

We may wonder how could it be that anyone would every think of Jesus welcoming sinners as a bad thing. But it's not too far removed from our thought process even today, in fact it's imbedded within every one of us. Let's take a look at the Pharisees in Jesus' story. The Pharisees always seemed to follow Jesus with the intention of finding fault with him. They disguised their evil intentions with pure motives of wanting to learn from Jesus, but the reality was they were looking for some way to discredit him. Is was their window of opportunity.

We may not think that Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners is that big of a deal, but we don't view eating a meal together in the same way that Eastern cultures do. In Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures, eating a meal with someone indicated a close bond, a bond of fellowship. Jesus claimed to be a great Rabbi and teacher, but the Pharisees thought how could this be when he associates with the scum of society. "He can't be taken seriously...look who he hangs out with."

It would be different if the scumbags of society came up to Jesus to listen to him, but Jesus actively went and sought these people out. One of his disciples, Matthew, was a tax-collector. Jesus went and sought out people who did not live up to the social and religious expectations of Jewish society. These are people that were shunned by others because of who they were and what they had done. It's no wonder these people sat and listened to Jesus. While everyone else told them to reform their life or be condemned, Jesus spoke of forgiveness. The Pharisees came only to accuse, the sinners came only to listen. What the Pharisees had accused him of, Jesus showed to be the wonderful gospel – **THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS.**

He spoke two parables of lost things to show them why he welcomed sinners. The first parable is that of a shepherd, and he puts the burden to answer on them. **"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?"** Losing one sheep out of a hundred may not seem like a big loss, but to a shepherd, who cares about each of his sheep, it is a big loss. Just like a shepherd cares about one sheep, Jesus cares about each and every sinner. He not only welcomes them, but he goes out and finds them like lost sheep.

The second of two parables is about a woman who has ten coins and loses one. With 1/10th of her wealth missing, she too searches high and low in her house looking for her lost coin. And when she finds it, she rejoices. Both the shepherd and the woman call their friends and neighbors to join in their rejoicing over finding what was lost. This is how Jesus feels about each and every sinner, and this is how heaven reacts to each sinner who repents.

Now we get that, right? Jesus talking about finding the lost, actively searching for them, and we can be happy that **THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS.** But I wonder, as you were listening to those parables, what audience did you place yourself in? I don't think many of us would say we were like the Pharisees thinking we're so much better than the sinners. But I don't think many of us put ourselves in the category of the "sinners" and tax-collectors either. Maybe we see ourselves somewhere in the middle, like as Jesus' disciples hoping just to learn a lesson from this event in Jesus' life.

There lies the problem. If we just look at this as some lesson that we can learn from, as a lesson in loving the lost like Jesus did, we miss the mark. Because like the Pharisees, something that is imbedded in each one of us is the need to compare. In this world, even though we claim not to, we set up pecking orders. Somewhat a sinner, more so a sinner, and very much a sinner are categories into which we sort people. We're happy Jesus would welcome a sinner like me, but could he really welcome a sinner like that? See how that comes across in this story:

In a certain church, a man walked through the doors 20 minutes into the service. He had a wrinkled Hard Rock Café T-shirt stained with tobacco and sweat, unkempt hair and a shaggy beard, and shoes held together by nothing more than duct tape. He gingerly approaches the doors where the

congregation was just finishing the hymn before the sermon. He pushes open the door and sees no easily accessible seat in the back, and starts walking up the center aisle of the church. All eyes are on this man as he walks slowly to the front of the church and sits down right in the aisle.

A few moments go by, everybody is still staring at the man, the pastor isn't quite sure if he should start his sermon. Then an usher, a long-time member of the church gets up from his seat, buttons up his suit jacket and walks down the aisle. Finally, people think, he is going to restore some order to this proceeding. As the elderly man approaches the front of the church, he stops, gets down and sits with the man. Then the pastor and the congregation realize that elderly man's point. This ruffled, unkempt man is also a sinner who needs to hear God's Word.

It's a story that shows how easy it is for even Christians to be able to judge other people, think we're better than others. And how many of us made those divisions between us and other people. We say we're better than them because we haven't smoked, we haven't done drugs, we haven't had pre-marital sex, we haven't killed a man, as if somehow this should make God stand up and applaud us. But God has no sin-o-meter that measures one sin more heavily than another, no list of the 10 or 20 worst sinners. Just full forgiveness for everyone. We are not before God as actors looking for applause, we are before God as beggars.

And it is only when I place myself in the place of the lost sheep, the lost coin, that I fully see God's love for me. My sin, however small it may seem in my own eyes, creates a rift between me and God, it makes me lost. I was wandering around like a lost sheep, not knowing what is good for me or what is dangerous. And my good shepherd, who has everything and needs nothing, came down to earth to find me. He carries me upon his shoulders all the way to the cross of Calvary. I am no different than the other lost sheep Jesus has come to save. **THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS**, and if we add the apostle Paul's words, **"of whom I am the worst."** That statement is no longer a rebuke against Jesus. But is the very gospel message we cling to.

(2)

Did you hear what happens in heaven over one sinner who repents? There is much rejoicing. God has no joy over those who don't think they need to repent, only those who do. We rejoice that **THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS**, because that means he has welcomed me. But we also rejoice that **THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS**, because it means he welcomes others too. We have been picked to be on God's team, so what should our reaction be to others who are picked to be on God's team? We want to rejoice, we are happy, we are glad. Although sometimes this can be easier said than done. And why is that? Because so often, we are driven by the wrong motivation.

A natural motivation is driven by the law – God loves sinners, so that means that I must love sinners too. I must do whatever I can to love sinners and tell them about Jesus so God can save them. A motivation driven by the law can only fail. Because that motivation is dependent upon what I have done, and let's face it, how often have I missed opportunities to show joy over sinners that repent? How often have I purposely showed disdain for **THIS MAN WHO WELCOMES SINNERS** like that? I am left to feel like I have let God down, I've let my church down. Without realizing it or meaning to, we have let Jesus go.

The source of our joy can only come from gospel motivation, from knowing that THIS MAN WELCOMES ME! It is only when we get back to the gospel that we can have the joy that is had in heaven over sinners who repent. No pressure is on us to perform (so to speak). No pressure is put on us to get better. The pressure we feel is all in our head. It is the gospel motivation that leads us to desire God's will. It is the gospel which not only has the power to save us, but also to create new people within us.

Think about it, that's why we're here as a church – a group of believers gathering together right here in Rita Ranch. Our goal and purpose is not just to have the same bunch meeting here at Cottonwood. We want to tell others about THE MAN WHO WELCOMES SINNERS, THE MAN WHO WELCOMED ME! While we don't have a quota of people to tell each week about Jesus, we don't need one, we are motivated by the gospel. Tell someone what Jesus means to you, tell someone why you come to church each Sunday, why you read your bible. Loving sinners is natural when we have the gospel motivation.

There are many times throughout history where an insult has been turned into a badge of honor. Whether it was with the name Packers, Christians, or Lutherans, there are many today who take pride in being called those names. The Pharisees wanted to use the name "friend of sinners" as an insult. But it is no insult at all, but the gospel truth. As we approach Jesus, let us be more like the tax-collectors and sinners who came to hear Jesus, and less like the Pharisees who came to find fault with him. For we know God's message of healing is the sweetest words this world will ever hear. THIS MAN WELCOMES SINNERS! Rejoice in that fact. Amen.