

September 23, 2007  
Pentecost 17

*"Jesus Welcomes Sinners"*

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**LUKE 15:1-10**

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**N**ow the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." <sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "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? <sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> "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? <sup>9</sup> And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' <sup>10</sup> In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Have you ever lost a pet and then found it again? Remember how happy you were? How could I ever forget that early spring day when I was about ten years old and almost lost Tippy, the best dog we ever had on the farm? The snow was melting, the river that went through the farm was rising, and the ice was ready to go out. Boy and his dog went to check out the river, but the dog did not know how dangerous the ice was. He ran out on the ice and broke through. Down he went, under the ice, swept away by the fast moving cold water. I thought he was gone, but a few seconds he popped up his head again. He tried to grab on to the edge of the ice with his front paws, but was swept under the ice again. Seconds that seemed like an eternity he appeared again and held onto the edge of the ice with his front paws whimpering loudly as if to say, "Can't you help me?" There was nothing to do except yell loudly a familiar call, "Tippy come home." The dog lurched forward and caught the edge of the ice with his back paws. He made it safely across the rotten ice and joyfully ran to me, jumping up and down and running around in circles. Needless to say it was a happy moment I have not forgotten.

Do you remember the joy when you found your lost pet and held it in your arms? Remember when you thought your child had wandered off and the joy when you found her again and held her in your arms? Remember when you found those rebate slips that you thought you had thrown away? We all have our stories of joy when we found something that we thought had been lost.

Jesus was good at telling stories that touched people with emotion and feeling. He told the story of a shepherd who lost a sheep, found it, placed it on his shoulders and brought it home rejoicing. He told the story of a woman losing a coin, searching for it and then sharing the joy with her friends. The whole purpose of these stories, including the touching story of the lost son, was to illustrate the joy that Jesus shares with the heavenly angels and with us over one sinner that repents. Jesus wants to see this same joy celebrated daily in our lives as well. It is the joy that Jesus had of welcoming sinners.

## **We see the welcoming heart of Jesus**

It says, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him." The sentence structure in the original Greek puts a strong emphasis on how the people drew near to Jesus and gathered around him. It implies that there was something so inviting and so compelling and so open that the worst people in society felt totally comfortable coming to Jesus and inviting their friends to join them. The misfits of society, the dysfunctional, those beaten down and battered by their sin and even cheating tax collectors disgusted with their lives of sin, all came to Jesus and found a warm welcome and hope.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law could not stand to see Jesus so open and so friendly to people no one really liked very much. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" they said with disdain and disgust. Jesus wasn't just sitting down and talking to these people, he was welcoming them with open arms. Jesus knew his mission and purpose so clearly set forth in the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, <sup>3</sup>and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor." The tax collectors and sinners believed Jesus was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. They found forgiveness and peace in Jesus and they became oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, a display of God's glory and splendor.

We have nothing to offer Jesus this morning when we come to him except our broken and battered lives. We don't come to Jesus today pointing out all the good things that we did this past week and then use that as our way of asking him to love us and care for us and forgive us and give us eternally life? No we come to him confessing our sin as these people did. "Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful and that I have disobeyed You in my thoughts, words, and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good. For this I deserve Your punishment both now and in eternity. But I am truly sorry for my sins, and trusting in my Savior Jesus Christ, I pray: Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Then we hear Jesus say to us, "God our heavenly Father, has been merciful to us and has given His only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Therefore, as a called servant of Christ and by His authority I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

If I want to get along with people, I try to show them kindness and love and consideration. I may even do this when I drive on the freeway. Hopefully by doing good to them they will do good to me. It works. Try it. Believe me. It works with people but it does not work with God. The religious people, the Pharisees and teachers of the law told the people they had to have something to offer God such as meticulous keeping of Old Testament laws and man made rules and regulations. That never works because whatever we try to offer God to barter for our forgiveness or his love or even eternal life is always tainted with sin. As the Bible teaches, "There is none that does good, no not one." That is why Jesus told us, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." Jesus takes us just as we are, cleanses us by his blood, and then gives us the power, amazing power

to live a whole new life just as he did with these cheating tax collectors and sinners who came to him. We become oaks of righteousness, a display of his splendor for his glory.

The joyful attitude that Jesus had toward these people is one that we want to see more in ourselves as we come into contact with people this week who are desperately in need of knowing what Jesus has to offer them.

### **We want this welcoming heart in us**

Look at the joy of the shepherd who found the lost sheep and the woman who found the lost coin. The shepherd eagerly searches for the lost sheep. Time is of the essence. The bleating cries of lost sheep are an open invitation for wild animals to and a nice meal of fresh lamb. The shepherd knows the sheep cannot defend themselves, and they certainly do not have the speed to run away. See the shepherd leave immediately. See him running down the path. He does not wait till tomorrow. He knows the animal will not survive the night. He searches for it until he finds it. Then he carries it joyfully on his shoulders and invites his family and neighbors to share in his joy.

This past summer we did a project for Bible Camp that had a picture of Jesus as the shepherd bringing the sheep home. We mounted the picture on a board. One mother told me recently her twin daughters have their picture of Jesus the loving shepherd near their beds in their bedroom. What always impresses us is the joy on the face of Jesus. Hebrews even tells us for the joy set before Jesus endured the cross and the shame.

Listen to how the Lord speaks of his relentless love and joy in rescuing the lost in Ezekiel 34, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. <sup>13</sup> I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. <sup>14</sup> I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel." That's the kind of determination, love and joy we want to have for people especially when we see how lost they are without Jesus.

You can see the same determination and joy in the story of the woman who lost the coin. It was night and it was dark, but that did not stop her from taking a lamp, a small oil lamp, and search the house, every inch of it, until the lost coin was found. When she found it she also called her family and friends together and said to them, "Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin." Jesus said that there is joy among the angels of heaven over one sinner who repents. The message of the gospel is going out into all the world just as Jesus said it would. People are coming out of darkness and into the light. Angels are rejoicing every day over each sinner who repents as the message of the gospel goes out into the world and brings people into the kingdom of God.

We cannot see what God sees when he looks into the hearts of people and sees the moment they believe, but we can rejoice over every opportunity big and small that the Lord gives

us in our lives to bring the truth of his Word to people. It is through that Word the Lord Jesus comes like a shepherd and rescues those who are lost. One of the greatest joys any Christian parent can have is teaching the Word of God to their children. The angels rejoice in heaven whenever this happens. One of the greatest joys ever given to you is to share God's Word with people who come across the path of your life. That's a joy we have when we worship together as we are doing today and a joy we have when we rub shoulders and have contact with people who are still lost as we worship the Lord in our daily tasks of life this coming week.

Back in the early 1970's a disillusioned hippy from the Bay area decided to visit a local church in a very affluent community. He walked in late while the congregation was singing the first hymn. He walked down the rows of full church and all the seats were taken. Finally he decided to do what all good hippies do with their long hair, bare feet, and torn jeans. He sat on the floor in the very front of the church. People were shocked. An elder of the church walked up to the young man. People wondered whether he might ask him to leave. Others hoped and prayed he would show kindness and love to the young man who was not like the rest of the congregation. What did the elder do as he walked up so nicely dressed in his best suit? He sat down next to the hippy, opened his hymnal and helped him sing the hymns. Jesus welcomed sinners. May the Lord God help you and me to see opportunities to do the same in our lives. Amen.