

Rejoice When Sinners Repent.

Text: Luke 15:1-10

Suggested Hymns:
237, 351, 317, 437, 170

- 1) There Is Joy In Heaven Over A Repentant Sinner
- 2) By This We Are Reminded Of The Great Mercy Which We Ourselves Have Experienced

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 15:1-10, ¹ *Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.* ² *And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."*

³ *So He spoke this parable to them, saying: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which 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 neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' ⁷ "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.*

⁸ *"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ "And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!' ¹⁰ "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Some time ago a new radio station was built. The ministerial association of that city was offered a chance to broadcast over the new station. They debated the question whether they should accept that offer, and in that connection asked the advice of a pastor who had considerable experience with broadcasting.

They asked him, *“If you had a chance to preach over this station, just exactly what would you preach?”* The pastor said, *“Why, that question has never occurred to me. I preach the Word of God, Law and Gospel, of sin and grace.”*

He would be happy to preach on a text such as today’s Gospel, telling of the love of the Saviour seeking the lost, and the joy in heaven because of the rescue of the lost. Conversely, this is a text which would embarrass the liberal and self-righteous, for they would hardly know what to do with this text and theme.

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him, says our text. These were notorious, public sinners, but sinners who had been brought to repentance through the mighty preaching of John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ. Now they had come to Jesus to hear words of divine consolation and instruction.

But will Jesus have anything to do with such despicable, dissolute characters? Will He not draw aside the skirt of His garment lest it be contaminated by their touch?

How Jesus dealt with them is reflected in the next verse of the text, *And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.”* That was true enough. Sinners, noted evildoers, did flock around Jesus. He received them in kindness and did not refuse their invitation to enter their homes and sit at their table.

But when Jesus received sinners, He did not make light of their sin. He received sinners, but only to cleanse them and save them from condemnation. He indeed called sin, sin, and guilt, guilt; but He was moved to pitying mercy and cleansing love for sinners who accepted His redeeming compassion.

Moreover, Jesus very sharply rebuked those self-righteous people who professed to be scandalised by His dealing so kindly with humbly repentant sinners. And in the stories of our text Jesus shows us why it is totally proper for Him to receive sinners, and wants to teach us that we, too, should rejoice when sinners come to repentance. Therefore we are prompted to rejoice when sinners repent. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. There Is Joy In Heaven Over A Repentant Sinner

The previous section of Luke's Gospel had the cost of being a disciple as its subject. It concluded with Jesus' admonition: "***He who has ears to hear, let him hear.***" This new chapter tells us who did gather to hear: tax collectors and sinners. And not only did they listen to Jesus, they were even welcomed to eat with Jesus!

The word "sinner" not only refers to people who were especially immoral and wicked; but also to people who were not strict about fulfilling all the varied requirements of the ceremonial law. They were "sinners" in the eyes of the Pharisees because of their neglectful attitude toward religion. Tax collectors are one striking example of such sinners.

The question of eating with tax collectors and sinners was raised previously¹ after Jesus had called Levi to become one of His followers. The Pharisees and teachers of the law again mutter about the table companions with whom Jesus fellowships.

In answer to the criticism, Jesus tells three parables. All three have to do with joy over finding what was lost. First, a shepherd rejoices over finding the one lost sheep out of a hundred; next, a woman rejoices to find the one coin she had lost out of ten; finally, a father who has two sons gives a joyous banquet to celebrate the return of the one who had been lost.

Luke chapter 15 has been called "*the lost and found chapter.*" It shows a love for the lost that goes beyond anything human. It is a divine love which seeks the lost. It has also been called the heart of the third Gospel.

The description Jesus gives of the shepherd joyfully returning home carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders is heart-warming. He bids his friends to come and celebrate with him the recovery of one lost sheep. There is no mention at all of the 99 sheep out there in the open country. All attention is focused upon the lost sheep that was found. Jesus says that the same is true in heaven: there is more rejoicing over the lost sinner who repents than over the 99 righteous people who do not need to repent.

The suggestion that some people don't need to repent sounds like heresy to us. Jesus had said to the crowds, "***Unless you repent, you too will all perish.***"² We need to understand the statement of Jesus as a criticism of the Pharisees who thought they were so righteous that they did not need to repent. Jesus is saying to

them, *“God is not rejoicing over you and your attitude; God is rejoicing over the lost sinner who repents.”*

In the parable there is an invitation by the shepherd for his friends to share in the joy of finding the lost. The question needs to be asked, Are we able to share in God’s joy over the repenting sinner? This was something we will find that the older brother could not do. It was something that the Pharisees and law experts could not do. But the angels of God take part in this joyful celebration.

There is joy with the angels in heaven when a sinner comes to repentance and faith. That fact is set forth very clearly and emphatically in our text. When but one of the hundred sheep of a shepherd’s flock has strayed away, does he not leave the ninety and nine to seek and recover that lost sheep?

When a woman misses one of her ten pieces of money, does she not search diligently for it, and show gladness in regaining it? What true-hearted father would not welcome his prodigal son when he returns in humble penitence, even if he presents a sorry spectacle as he drags his weary, ragged feet back to the parental doorstep?

Would God, then, remain cold and unmoved when one of His creatures is lost? Would there not be joy in heaven over a sinner that comes to repentance? There is actually divine grief over the lost.

Recall for a moment how we feel when something precious is lost. What a dark cloud rests upon a house where a son full of promise and talent turns out to be wasteful and a disappointing failure, or where a sheltered daughter goes wrong!

What grief must God feel that man, whom God has created for a life of holiness and everlasting blessedness, chooses to go his own way, rebel against his Maker, and aspire to be, equally wise and knowing, and embarks on a course of disobedience which must end in death!

What grief must therefore assail the heart of God to see man, who was destined for such great things, plunge into sin and despair, death and eternal night! And just as it is with us, that the ailing and disabled child comes in for a special measure of love and attention, so the compassionate and sinner-seeking love of God seems to shine forth most brightly where the tragic consequences of sin appear most plainly and painfully.

One can readily see that there was a loss as far as God is concerned when man fell into sin, for man had been created for life and glory. The earth, in the midst of which man was placed, radiated beauty, and all nature was to serve man. This was the earth with all that bewildering panorama of sky and sea, of plant life and starlight, centring around man, a creature of the highest excellence. Man was endowed with intelligence and emotional faculties and reactions to make his existence a truly happy and harmonious life.

Now, then, imagine the rejoicing in heaven when despite sin and Satan, man's weakness and dismal failure, nevertheless, grace overcomes and overrules sin, and man, the lost sinner, is found and is saved and brought back into the proper relation with God, and the gracious plan and intention of God is achieved after all.

Love will go to the greatest lengths to seek and to save the lost, to locate that lost coin, to find the lost sheep. The good shepherd leaves the ninety nine that are in no particular danger and seeks the one sheep that has strayed away, seeks it with infinite care and patience, and follows its meandering trail, fighting through briar bushes and sucking bogs, until the lost sheep is found. Then that poor lost sheep, wobbly and faint, is lifted to the shoulders of the shepherd and is carried back to the fold.

In similar fashion God seeks His lost sheep, who strayed off into the inhospitable wastes and thorny company of this world, are faint and famished as they fail to find nourishment in the vain wisdom of this world, and are bruised by the thorny pricks of their conscience, as the Saviour lifts His voice in the Gospel to call and invite them, and bring them back to the fold.

What a joyous achievement, to find and bring back a lost sheep! Lost and found, dead and brought back to life. What contrasts, and what joyful triumph is summed up in those words! And so, as we think of the homely comparisons of our text, of a shepherd getting back one lost sheep, a father embracing a foot-sore, repentant, returning prodigal son, or a woman sweeping for the lost coin, we can begin to grasp the glorious truth that there is joy among the angels over one sinner that comes to repentance. Here Jesus is stressing the divine joy over the repentance of a single sinner.

And we shall want to share that joy, even if some people on earth may not be inclined to show such joy but turn up their noses at a repentant Magdalene and show their disgust, like the Pharisees, at a reformed tax-collector.

Let us take our cue from the joy and satisfaction that is found in heaven, from the joyful contemplation of the fact that here Christ may see the fruits of His work, see of the labour of His soul, as the Prophet says.³ And all the more readily will we share in that joy of heaven over one sinner who repents since that is a very strong reminder of the grace which has reached out for us, ourselves.

2. By This We Are Reminded Of The Great Mercy Which We Ourselves Have Experienced

Is there something strange, offensive, repulsive in this thought of joy over a sinner found and saved? Surely, we should not find it so, for that is what happened to us.

We hear the blessed Gospel statement that Jesus receives sinners, and we rejoice, for that is what we are, sinners. All we like sheep have gone astray, says Isaiah.⁴ Sin is defection from God, falling away from God, rebellion against God, following our own will and desire rather than God's will and command. And all of us are sinners.

Before God we are all in the same condemnation, and every mouth is shut, and all the world is guilty before Him. Men may set up an arbitrary difference and consider as sinners only those who were publicly revealed as gross sinners and who fell into public disgrace. But the Bible shows us that there is no difference and that all come short of the glory which we should have with God. Nor could we find the way back to God by ourselves. We were by nature blind and dead in trespasses and sins, and if the Law were to prevail, we would have perished in our lost estate.

But the great Good Shepherd sought and found us. The Word of God reached our ear, and the Holy Spirit through the Gospel brought us to faith and made us children of God and heirs of heaven. Our Lord Jesus Christ finished the work of our salvation and then sent the Gospel of that finished redemption to us.

Then the Holy Spirit gave into our heart the conviction that this is true and meant for us, and the courage to believe the Gospel and take comfort in it. And

in heaven, according to our text, there was rejoicing when we came to repentance and faith.

And so it is true, gloriously true, that Jesus receives sinners. How utterly wrong for anyone to find fault with Jesus for receiving sinners! How deeply thankful we are for that truth, the fruit of which we ourselves have experienced!

And what a blessed Gospel which we are therefore sent to preach! With what deep satisfaction will we speak on this topic! Listen to it again, A compassionate Saviour has come to seek and to save that which was lost. In Jesus there is hope for everyone, for the lowest and the worst. He comes to cleanse, to pardon, to receive, and to bless, if but repentant souls take to heart His gracious ministrations and come to Him.

His invitation still rings out, Scripture says in Matthew 11:28, ²⁸ ***“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*** And in Acts 4:12, ¹² ***“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”***

Friend, have you learned to believe in God and to rejoice in your salvation, and in the salvation of others, in the truth that Jesus receive sinners?

God grant that we may all receive the blessings of His grace, trust and rejoice in Him, remain in His faith and favour, and come at last into the perfect joys of heaven, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Luke 5:30

² Luke 13:5

³ Isaiah 53:11

⁴ Isaiah 53:6