

## Jesus Sinners Doth Receive

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading. Jesus said, **“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.** Here ends our text.

Here we go again. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is again not behaving the way that the Pharisees and scribes think He should. What’s Jesus’ crime this time? He’s eating with tax collectors and sinners. We might ask, “What’s wrong with that?” The tax collectors whom we know who work for the IRS are upstanding civil servants who do their duty for the good of our government and nation. Sinners? Well, everyone’s a sinner. If Jesus could never eat with sinners, He’d be dining alone every meal.

But the religious rulers had an exclusive definition of sinner - people who they thought were unworthy of table fellowship. In their mind, they labeled people “sinner” based upon their vocation, their economic status, or even their ill health. Some tax collectors were known for overcharging or skimming off the top of the revenues for their personal gain. As they collected taxes for the Romans, they were thought of as traders against their nation. But when tax collectors came to be baptized by John, he didn’t tell them that their office was bad and they should quit, but that they should simply repent of collecting more than they were authorized. The religious leaders also categorized as “sinners” those of the despised trades of herdsmen, peddlers, or tanners. If you were born with a physical deformity or were blind, deaf, or lame, God must be punishing you for your sin; therefore, you were a “sinner.” If you were a Samaritan or Gentile who didn’t follow Jewish ceremonial law, you were a “sinner.” Whom didn’t the religious rulers classify as “sinners?” Why, themselves of course, and also those of more honorable professions, those who were healthy and wealthy, those who were regular participants in the synagogue and Temple worship, those who appeared to be blessed by God. But Jesus was eating with the lowly, the despised, the suspect. The Pharisees and scribes grumbled that Jesus was having table fellowship with such rabble, thereby legitimizing such persons.

Now, whether we admit it or not, there’s a little bit of Pharisee in all of us. I can look out on our congregation today, and I can see lots of folks who are well educated with honorable vocations or well-deserved retirements, who participate in our weekly worship and serve admirably in our church, who by the world’s standards are successful. The Pharisees would probably be very pleased with all of you and glad to sit next to you at the dinner table. But sometimes we behave like those Pharisees. Everyday, we judge people by their vocation, their clothes, their hygiene, their dialect, and their ignorance of our ways and what we think is proper. We would never think to sit next to them in the cafeteria, show them hospitality, or even converse with them. Sometimes we won’t even acknowledge them when they walk in our church door or join us in our fellowship hall. They just don’t fit the mold of our Germanic descent or church traditions. We grumble at others who invite and welcome these folks into our midst. We act like Pharisees. And that superior, self-righteous attitude makes us all sinners.

However, the Pharisees got one thing right, which is good news for all of us. They said of Jesus, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” This is the truth which we sang in our opening hymn, “Jesus sinners doth receive.” There is a difference, though, between the “sinners” Jesus received and ate with and the Pharisees who were self-righteous sinners. The Pharisees stood aloof from Jesus, hardened their hearts, refused to hear Him, and even grumbled at His mercy. They remained unrepentant. But the sinners whom Jesus ate with drew near to Him in order to hear Him. This is the first step in repentance – hearing the words of Jesus and listening to Him. Now when Jesus spoke with sinners, He never condoned their sin or enabled them to continue sinning. The theme of His message was “Repent for the kingdom of God is near.” “Turn from your sin. Leave your life of sin. Turn to me for forgiveness. Don’t despair in your low estate. Even though the religious rulers despise you, God really loves you. Believe that I love you so much that I will take the punishment for your sins and lay down my life for you.” Instead of grumbling about “sinners” and grumbling about showing mercy to “sinners,” Jesus rejoiced whenever one sinner heard His words and repented.

To teach these truths, Jesus told three parables to those who ate with him while in the hearing of the Pharisees. In the first parable Jesus said, **“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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls**

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - September 11, 2022

**together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’** In the parable Jesus shows that by having fellowship and receiving sinners, He’s doing exactly what He’s supposed to be doing as our Good Shepherd. When you were the one lost sheep, Jesus wasn’t content with the other ninety-nine. He went after you, found you, laid you on His shoulders, and brought you to His fold. Your repentance was all His doing. Jesus pursued you with His word of Law and Gospel that turned you from your sinful life to faith in His forgiveness. Instead of grumbling about you and your sin, God rejoices when His lost sheep is found, when you repent and Jesus saves you.

But this repentance didn’t happen just once at your initial conversion. This repentance happens every day whenever you confess your sin and receive Christ’s forgiveness. When Jesus tells us, “There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,” the tense of the word “repent” is a continuous action. “There is joy in heaven over one sinner who continues to repent.” Martin Luther rightly said in his first of the Ninety-five Theses, “The entire life of a Christian is to be one of repentance.” So the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the angels and saints in heaven rejoice everyday when you repent, more so, Jesus said, than the ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Here, Jesus is taking a dig at the Pharisees, who classified others as sinners and not themselves, who didn’t think they needed to repent.

In the second parable, Jesus repeats His message that God seeks lost sinners, and the heavens rejoice when they repent. Jesus said, **“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”** In this parable, God acts like the woman who isn’t content with nine silver coins, but He lights the lamp of the Gospel in a dark world and searches diligently for the tenth lost coin. God picks you up from the dirty floor and restores you to His collection. He tells the angels and saints in heaven, “Rejoice with me for I have found the one who was lost.” He found you. The angels and archangels rejoice that God has brought you to repentance.

Though it’s not in our Gospel reading today, the third parable that Jesus tells is the story of the Prodigal Son. The younger son has left his father and squandered his inheritance, but while he’s in the pig pen, he repents and remembers his father’s goodness. He returns to his father who graciously receives him and restores him to his house. The father then hosts a great banquet with all his friends and neighbors to eat and rejoice that his lost son is now found. Of course, the self-righteous, older brother grumbles like a Pharisee and refuses to join the celebration. But that parable is another sermon.

Unlike the grumbling Pharisees, though, we rejoice that this very day Jesus receives sinners like us and eats with us. Jesus, the sin offering for mankind, has given to His Church the ultimate meal relating to repentance and forgiveness – the Sacrament of the Altar. In a moment, we’ll sing the Proper Preface to Holy Communion. We’ll rejoice and give thanks with all the angels and archangels and with the company of heaven as we laud and magnify our God for this holy meal. Though we correctly magnify the fact that in this meal sinners are eating the very body and blood of Christ given and shed at the cross for the forgiveness of sins, yet the early church – more so than today – magnified the fact that Christ at this Supper is also dining with His people. Jesus promised his disciples that he would again eat the Passover meal with them when the kingdom of God was fulfilled in His death and resurrection. In the Lord’s Supper Jesus is both its food and its host.

And you come to this altar today, not grumbling about the other sinners here, but as a repentant sinner yourself. You continue to repent of being a Pharisee, of being self-righteous, of being a sinner, and Jesus receives you and eats with you. Jesus, the Lamb of God who gives you His flesh to eat, is also the Good Shepherd who finds His lost sheep, hoists you on His shoulders, and carries you back to His fold.

Sheep that from the fold did stray  
No true shepherd e’er forsaketh;  
Weary souls that lost their way  
Christ, the Shepherd, gently taketh  
In His arms that they may live:  
Jesus sinners doth receive. Amen.

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