

July 5, 2009
Riverside Covenant Church
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Luke 15:1-7 – Leave the Flock

Read Luke 15:1-7.

This morning I want us to wrestle with three things as we study our passage from Luke 15. First, who are the tax collectors and sinners in our world or community today? Second, what does it mean for us to welcome and eat with them? And third, why is that God seeks the lost and we don't?

Three questions that this passage calls us to ask us this morning.

Here is what we know is happening in our passage this morning. Jesus is teaching to a crowd of people and tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around him to hear him. And the Pharisees are not happy that Jesus welcomes and eats with them.

We hear a lot about the Pharisees in the Bible. They are Jews and so they live by all of the Old Testament laws. But they are a specific sect of Judaism. There were different denominations of Jews that held slightly different interpretations of the Old Testament laws. The Pharisees adhered to a particular body of traditions which were both an interpretation of Old Testament law and a supplement to it. Generally the Pharisees that Jesus interacts with are legalists. They are obsessed with the letter of the law and with uncleanness. Their associations with sinners and others despised in society is that they will be guilty by association. In the ancient world, the Pharisees language could be quite strong. One Pharisees comment found in ancient Rabbinic literature was, **“Let a man never associate with a wicked person, not even for the purpose of bringing him near to the Torah.”** The Torah is the Old Testament law. So here you find that it is so dangerous to associate with a wicked person, that it should not even be done to connect them with the faith. Strong words.

You can see why the Pharisees had such a strong reaction to Jesus' welcoming and eating with the tax collectors and sinners of his day.

Who were the tax collectors and sinner, though. Why were they so despised in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day, Jews were subject to a complex system of taxation. There were basically 3 kinds of taxes in Jesus' day: the land tax, the head tax, and the customs tax. The bulk of the taxes were paid on the produce of land.

Landowners generally gave approximately 1/10 or 10% of their produce to the Roman government.

The head tax was basically charged per person each year. It was likely at least one days wages per person. Starting at age 14, males paid the tax. Perhaps most abused of the three forms of taxation was the customs tax. The Romans had a system of tolls and duties collected at ports and city gates where goods were subject to multiple taxation, especially on long journeys. Rates often varied from 2%-5% of the value of the goods. The complexity of the system and the assessor's power to determine value allowed for injustice.

The land tax and the head tax were collected by councils of Jewish leaders on an annual basis. The customs taxes, though, were "farmed." The highest bidder paid in advance to collect taxes from a given area. In the tax-farming system, Rome received its money in advance, and the tax farmer made his living from commissions on tolls and customs. The tax "farmers" were the tax collectors of the Gospels. To stop people on the road and demand a portion of their goods certainly appeared to be institutionalized robbery. Additionally, an occupation which depends for success on suspicion, intrusion, harassment and force tends not to attract the most pleasant personalities. Tax "farmers" were seen as the embodiment of dishonesty.

So there are your tax collectors. Who then are these general "sinners" that are often referenced in the Gospels? At a basic level, "sinners" were just those that were labeled "wicked" by the religious leaders. There were placed in contrast to those that were "righteous." Another use is simply as people outside the boundaries of Israel or at least of a different faction within Judaism.

The Pharisees were a sect with clear ideas of the character of life and conduct required to maintain the covenant righteousness of the people of God. As such they were highly likely to regard as sinners those who disagreed with them and who lived in open disregard of this righteousness. The Pharisees firmly believed in the authority of their traditions, and those who were opposed to their practices were considered to be opposed to God.

The more members of the Jewish community moved away from Pharisaic standards, the more likely the Pharisees would dub them sinners. When the Pharisees used the term "sinners" they meant one who was opposed to the will of God as reflected in their understanding of the religious laws. Behind the objections and charges leveled against Jesus was the central fact that he was ignoring and abolishing

boundaries which more sectarian attitudes had erected within Israel. Hence, from the standpoint of Jesus' opponents a person was a sinner long as he or she did not conform to the expectations of the sect. From the standpoint of Jesus, a person was a sinner as long as long as he or she remained opposed to the will of God. Once a person accepted the offer of forgiveness and made a commitment of faith to follow Jesus, he or she became a disciple of Jesus. Jesus' offer of salvation to sinners apart from factional observance was a threat to the very foundation and way of life of sectarian Jews, yet it was at the heart of the gospel he came announcing.

The question posed is a good one. If Jesus is such a great teacher. If Jesus is such a man of God. If Jesus is one that believes we should be following, why in the world is he associating himself with the worst of the worst, the lying, cheating and stealing tax collectors and all the other sinners of the time. It is a good question.

I would imagine that you have asked yourself the same question about other people. If they are a Christian, why are they hanging out with that guy? If they are a Christian, why are they talking with those girls? We make judgments like that all of the time. We even have sayings that illustrate our thoughts. "You are the company that you keep."

And I suppose we have good reasons for having such concerns. We often spend a great deal of time speaking of the sinful world and our need to be in Christian community. And we talk about praying in a world that ignores God. Or we talk about reading our Bibles in world that thinks the Bible is stupid. And so we spend a great deal of time ensuring that we are in a good place. That we have good friends and that we have a good life.

But what is the point of all this moral behavior? What is the point of all this work trying to get to know God better? Why does it all matter?

For the Pharisees that are in Jesus' audience, the point of the moral life or the point of the faithful life is that it is a demonstration of their ability to be "good." Their following of all the religious rules and rituals and their disassociation with all things "bad" were demonstrations of how "good" they were. They saw themselves as set apart and above everything and everyone else. They were that prized bottle of wine that had a special place in the wine cellar that no one could go near.

Jesus has a different understanding of the faithful life, however. Jesus says that the point of it all is not to be placed in some special location secluded from everything bad. The point of the faithful life is to become a transformational influence on others.

I don't know how I could say it any stronger, but if you do not have a heart for those that do not yet know Christ than you need to know Christ better. If we have one prayer, it should regularly be that we desire the heart of God. And the heart of God is clearly that all may know Him.

Let's go back to our questions that we began with. Who are the tax collectors and sinners in our world or community today? You know who they are in your life. Perhaps it is your boss that seems to have absolutely no mercy. Perhaps it is your neighbor that seems to have no manners and no desire to mow his lawn. Maybe it is people that you don't think earn there keep in our country. It is probably the people that use language that you never would, or wear clothes that you think are offensive or inappropriate.

Who do you consider weak? Who is insignificant? Who is annoying? Who drives you absolutely crazy? Those are the tax collectors and sinners of our world.

And the tax collectors and sinners don't have to be people somewhere else either. Perhaps there are people in our church that aggravate you because they have a different approach to things. You might have family members that screw up repeatedly in their choices or that try your patience.

These are the tax collectors and sinners of our world. **By every standard that we have setup to weed out the good folk from the bad folk, the tax collectors and sinners fall short.** And yet, they are the ones that Jesus repeatedly associates himself with.

Shepherding was a despised and dirty trade. Many presumed shepherds were robbers because they often led sheep onto other people's land. Jesus' reference to shepherds would have caused the Pharisees, people immensely concerned about cleanliness, to imagine themselves involved in a trade they considered unclean. Yet the shepherd image is used of God's tender care of his people.

Jesus not only associates with tax collectors and sinners, but attracts them. Our passage begins by saying, “the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.” Do we attract sinners? Jesus wasn’t attracting sinners with soft language like “everyone is a good person” or “its all right you didn’t mean to.” Jesus was attracting sinners by speaking truth with love. You can’t ever say he was watering things down, but everyone still flocked to him.

People are oddly intrigued by the truth, no matter how far they are from it. The truth is a magnet. The more and more we embody the Spirit of God, the more attractive we will be.

So we arrive at the second question demanded of us in this text. What does it mean for us to welcome and eat with these people?

There was nothing more intimate that one could do with another friend in the ancient world than eat with them. As a starting point, we are called to notice those that others don't notice. One thing that was abundantly clear in Jesus' life was that those that the religious establishment had shunned, he embraced. His life was evidence that no one was excluded from receiving the gift of salvation that he offered through repentance. We are called to talk to the lost and we are called to go a step further and welcome them into our lives.

To eat with someone is to spend more time with them and to give more attention to them than simply casually saying “hi.” Jesus is setting up a distinction between stopping by the homeless shelter for an hour once a month and putting in our time and bringing people into our homes and our lives.

The example that Jesus uses is of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go find the one that is lost. The lost are made a priority. They are not an after thought, but the focus of attention. Jesus says elsewhere, “it is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick.”

Our final question is why is it that God seeks the lost, but we don't?

Many believe that Jesus based this parable on Ezekiel 34. There the prophet says to Israel, **“Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not**

take care of the flock. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ⁵ So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.”

“Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves.”

The first and greatest obstacle to developing God’s heart for the lost is getting over ourselves. Our comfort, our security, our pride, all drive us to focus on ourselves rather than others. The reality is that we simply don’t care.

And even if we really do care about our church family, we don’t really care about those outside of it. Conceptually we do, we are in support of the idea. But if someone watched our lives, they would not know it by our choices. It is too risky.

Think of the logic of Jesus’ shepherd example. It makes no sense in the way we generally think. I would have let the one go, because I have 99 others. Why risk the 99 for the one. The 99 are the good sheep. They did not go wandering off.

But Jesus’ heart aches for the wanderers. He desires to see them repent. He said there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Chasing the lost is not easy. They sometimes want to run away as you pursue them.

Our dog Spencer was like that. Tell story of Spencer darting across creek and running from us every time he saw us.

Our association with sinners is like the circumstances of a shepherd recovering a lost sheep and happily rejoicing with friends over the recovery. He emphasizes that the joy is God’s and that it responds

specifically to repentance of one sinner. Jesus highlighted the way that recovery takes place too (on his back).

The primary function of this parable for Jesus was a defense of his deliberate association with and eating with people known to be sinners. He showed those complaining about his actions that their attitude did not match the character and desires of God. What is revealed about the character of God is the value he places on even the least deserving and the care he extends to such people. God is not passive, waiting for people to approach him after they get their lives in order. He is the seeking God who takes the initiative to bring people back, regardless of how “lost” they are.

This past week I received a letter from Young Life that I think illustrates what it is like to have Jesus eyes for the lost when everyone else is turning and running from them. **Read letter.**

Jesus’ call to us this morning is to notice those that others are excluding. To engage in relationship before excluding. To leave the our comfortable and safe flock to go and find those that Jesus desires to pick up and carry home on his back.

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