

"This Man Receives Sinners"

The very first verse in our Scripture reading talks about sinners. These days we might wonder whether or not that word carries much weight outside of the church and really certain kinds of churches. A quick Google search reveals that in the broader culture, it is rarely used unless it is expressed in ironic quotation marks or in terms of something "naughty but nice." There is a contemporary brand of ice cream called *sin*. There are also some high-end chocolate truffles and some lingerie in which the color red predominates marketed with the brand name *sin*. I'm not sure the culture sees sin as a serious concern.

I'm also not sure; as Christian, we always get our response to what we call sin right. About ten years ago, a major three-year-long research project unveiled the increasingly negative reputation of Christians, especially among young Americans. According to this study, 87% of young people in America aged 16-29 think Christians, unlike Jesus, are too judgmental. That's interesting because Jesus, in this passage, is accused of *not* being judgmental. He is accused of *not* being serious enough about sin. He receives and eats with tax collectors and sinners.

The opening words of **Luke 15** can help us better understand how Jesus related to people considered to be sinners and what that means for us. We started this series of messages last week, *In Light of the Father's Compassion*. Last Sunday we took a wide angle look at the whole chapter and introduced the idea that it touches on multiple areas of life. This week we begin with the opening verses. **Luke 15:1-2** says, *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."*

The main truths for us to apply will be found in answering two simple questions. First,

I. **WHY WERE THE MOST HARSHLY JUDGED PEOPLE IN**

THE CULTURE IN JESUS' DAY DRAWN TO HIM?

You don't even have to understand the culture or history to get the sense that when they say, *This man (even that expression drips with disdain) receives sinners and eats with them.* Jesus' critics assume everyone would agree this was *not* the kind of thing Jesus should do.

This grouping of "*tax collectors and sinners*" appears multiple times in Scripture. It's a sort of shorthand label that captures a category of diverse people who share the unhappy fact that the whole culture looks down on them as bad people.

A. Did tax collectors and sinners deserve these negative labels?1

1. The tax collectors were both traitors and thieves. I saw a cartoon once titled something like "Not understanding the situation." It showed a man with a happy, excited look waving an envelope. He was saying, "*Hey, Honey, we got a letter from the IRS! Maybe we won something!*" The humor of that is that a letter from the IRS probably means you owe something. Unless you're expecting a refund, it's not something to get excited about. We don't really look down on tax collectors these days, but in Jesus' day, the tax collector was far worse. Tax collectors purchased the franchise to collect taxes for the Roman government in a particular area. They could charge whatever they could get over what was required and keep the difference for themselves. It was a system that was invited dishonesty, favoritism, and predatory scamming of oppressed people. To make things worse, it was all in the service of a deeply resented foreign government. The tax collectors were some of the easiest people to hate. They were traitors and thieves.

2. The tax collectors are grouped with the "sinners." What does that mean? Doesn't the Bible say *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God?*" Yes! That's **Romans 3:23**. And yet this label, "*sinners*," often occurs in the gospels alongside tax-collectors. When used like that, as a label or identity, it is a comprehensive word for someone whose life is "fundamentally and perpetually in contradiction to God's demands." 2 In **Matthew 21**, the predictable pattern of

grouping “tax collectors and sinners” is replaced twice by the phrase “tax-collectors and prostitutes.”³ While we are *all* sinners, this label suggests people for whom *sinners* becomes, in a sense, an identity.

The word for *sin* here means to miss or fall short of the mark. It's like there is a target or goal, but you missed it. The goal is alignment and harmony with God's will revealed in his word. We miss that mark. In Jesus' day, when sin, in that sense, becomes an entrenched and habitual pattern, a choice, a lifestyle even, then this label applied.

We are usually uncomfortable putting negative labels on people, but we won't see the power of what Jesus is doing here unless we see that these people did, in some sense, deserve these labels.

B. Undeserving people were drawn to Jesus because his response to them was *not* based on what they deserved.

1. They sensed God's gracious compassion revealed in Jesus, and they were drawn to him for that reason. The point is not that people were unfairly labeled, and Jesus saw past that to see that they were basically good on the inside. He saw the pearl in the oyster... but that even people universally recognized as not good and truly undeserving were met with compassion by Christ. When Jesus is criticized for receiving and eating with sinners, he responds with three stories that culminate in the parable of the compassionate Father who runs to embrace his undeserving son. What Jesus pictured in that story he embodied throughout his life. They sensed it and were drawn to it.

2. They also appreciated his critique of the self-righteous people who looked down on them and were judgmental toward them. They knew as non-Christians today know that many of the people who shook their heads in dismissive judgment toward them were full of inconsistency and self-serving pride and were also undeserving.

The Scribes were professionals, sort of lawyers who specialized in interpreting the application of the Bible's commands and the many traditions that had grown up around those commands. Many Scribes were also Pharisees. The Pharisees were sort of like a fraternity of

men who were bound by a high commitment to very conservative religious practices and very meticulous attention to the Jewish laws.

You get a sense of the issue Jesus had with them and what they had with Jesus from **Mark 7:5**,

And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"⁶ And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

*"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'*

I saw a YouTube video this week in which a street preacher was on a corner at Ohio University. It was the middle of a busy day. He was a young man with a bullhorn preaching repentance and warning of judgment. As he began he said, *In ten minutes of being on this land here, I've seen a lot of skin showing, crop tops... men and women dressed inappropriately and presenting their bodies as if they belong to the devil. You ladies over there, it's time for you to be godly women and present yourselves not as whores but as meek and quiet women pleasing to God. Yes! Even you woman!* . I didn't see any one scandalously dressed. I couldn't see who but he was calling out someone who was just walking down the street. It wasn't all bad but in the part I heard it seemed that his list of sins to call out and condemn was so predictable, and narrow. Have you ever known or seen anyone who may dress conservatively or modestly but is very proud, judgmental, vindictive, and unloving? It seemed like a Pharisee could have preached that message. When you read some of the most deeply convicting messages of Jesus, you often find him calling out people who actually looked respectable and religious on the outside. He talked about people praying and giving but doing it all to be seen by men and praised by people. He talked about hypocrisy, a lack of love, God-drenched devotion and worship. Jesus didn't let the self-righteous people get away with looking down on anyone.

Luke 18:9-14 fits well here. It says Jesus *told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:* ¹⁰ *“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”* Jesus was undeniably all about deconstruction. But what he was deconstructing was not the truth about God and sin and grace but the narrow traditional values of some very outwardly religious people who were full of pride and self-righteousness.

We often see Jesus in Scripture criticized for loving and receiving people known to be sinful. He must have shocked the religious leaders in **Matthew 21:31** when he said, *Truly I say to you the tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom before you.* But what was his point? It was not to affirm thievery or sexual sin! He was saying, "Look, these people are getting in ahead of you because they know they need grace. They know they need salvation. They need me. You need grace and salvation also. You don't deserve it either, but you don't see that." The ones who were drawn to him were those who had been awakened by the grace of God to see their deep spiritual need, and they came to him because of God's grace on them.

Listen to what he said in **John 6:37**. *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never cast out.*

Awakened by the Spirit of God, they came to him to receive the grace they knew they needed and Jesus offered.

Here's the second question.

II. WHY DID JESUS RECEIVE AND EAT WITH THE MOST OPENLY SINFUL, HARSHLY JUDGED PEOPLE IN THE SOCIETY?

One thing we can say with confidence is that...

A. It's not because Jesus didn't take sin seriously

or hate it thoroughly.

1. That seems to be the implication of the Scribes and Pharisees.

That can be the implication today when someone makes a comment like, “Jesus loved to hang out with drunks and prostitutes.” The implication is that he saw their sins as trivial and insignificant, “boys will be boys and girls just wanna have fun.” The danger is that in trying to accentuate the grace of God, we seriously misrepresent Jesus and the truth of Scripture. Jesus received and ate with sinners wrongly becomes Jesus loved a good party, which then becomes Jesus would rather party with drunks, drug dealers, and exotic dancers than go to your Bible study. Maybe not! The truth is no one takes sin more seriously than Jesus. Even in this chapter and the stories that follow. Sin leads to lostness in every instance and the need for repentance.

2. No one had a more convicting, penetrating view of sin than Jesus. Listen to how he calls out the scribes and Pharisees in **Matthew 23:23-28**

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First, clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

²⁷ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. There are actually seven of these woes! Does that sound as if Jesus took sin lightly? No! He saw it more seriously subtle and dangerous, deceptive and hidden but hated it.

B. Jesus was a friend of sinners because He came to seek and save the lost.

1. That's what is pictured in the story of the Shepherd, who goes out to find the lost sheep. A few chapters later, in Luke 19, it is pictured in the life of a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Jesus meets Zacchaeus and the man is born again. He wants to make right whatever he has done that is wrong. Jesus says today salvation has come to this house. Then at the end of the story, Jesus sums up the significance of what happened like this. **Luke 19:10** *the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*” To quote one author, *Jesus was a friend of sinners not because he winked at sin, ignored sin, or enjoyed light-hearted revelry with those engaged in immorality. Jesus was a friend of sinners in that he came to save sinners and was very pleased to welcome sinners who were open to the gospel, sorry for their sins, and on their way to putting their faith in him.* 4

2. What becomes clear in the gospel is that Jesus, as our good shepherd, has to go all the way to the cross to seek us and save us from our sins. In **1 Peter 1:24-25**, Peter writes *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed.* ²⁵ *For you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.* For Jesus, salvation is spiritual healing from the soul-destroying sickness of sin. He went to the cross to secure that salvation. He rose from the dead and offers it freely to anyone and everyone who will come to him and trust in him as Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

I've been enjoying reading books by Rebecca McLaughlin. She has a Ph.D. from Cambridge as well as a degree in Theology. She wrote *Confronting Christianity* and also *The Secular Creed*. Part of her story is she says she has never known a time when she didn't believe in God, and she's never known a time when she wasn't sexually attracted to other women. At times in her life, she wrestled with the Biblical teaching on sex and sexuality. She considered all the viewpoints and arguments otherwise but remained convinced that God's design for and command for sex is that it be the expression of the one-flesh union of a man and a woman in the context of a faithful marriage. She said

she had to face the truth that the Bible's "no" to same-sex relationships was unmistakable. However, she writes that what is equally unmistakable is the truth that God's prohibition of gay relationships was not hateful or homophobic.

Expounding Paul's prohibition of homosexuality in **1 Timothy 1**, she writes;

Is this because Paul was a homophobic bigot with a self-righteous hateful heart? No. Right after this passage..., Paul writes, 'The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (1 Tim. 1:15). Paul doesn't look down on people in gay relationships from the moral high ground. He says he is the worst sinner he knows, saved only to prove that someone so bad could be redeemed (1 Tim. 1:16). And every time Paul writes about same-sex sexual sin, he reminds his readers they are sinners too.

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Take to heart this truth that Christ, welcomes sinners of all kinds. Let that assurance pour strength into you when you want to draw near to him but are filled with doubts as to whether you will be warmly welcomed. When you find yourself thinking his love is conditional and his embrace is a blessing that you can't be sure of. When weighed down with guilt over the past and worries about the future, remember this man, this God-man Savior, welcomes sinners into his heart and his Father's home. Understand there is nothing you can do and nothing you need to do to make yourself more acceptable to God or to Christ other than to receive and rest in him as your Savior. Grace, like water, flows to the low places. In **John 6:37**, he says, *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*

Let the deep awareness of your own sins soften your heart towards others. We all need the same grace. We are all offered this life-giving, soul healing, welcoming grace from God. So we can and should be at the same time deeply humble and profoundly confident. We can be the child embraced, restored, and even celebrated! Imagine the moment you repent, or you repented. Jesus says there was joy in heaven. How

can you be a source of joy to God? Repent, believe the gospel, receive the grace, return to the Father, rest and rejoice with Him and reflect his compassion for others.

Amen.

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Lord Jesus, In faith, I draw near to receive you and be received by you. No matter how others see or judge me, I know that I do not deserve the compassion and grace you so freely offer. But I have a Savior in Jesus. He bore my sins on the cross, paying for them fully to grant me forgiveness and eternal life and place me in a state of grace and restore me to you. All this comes not through my works or merit but by grace alone through faith in Jesus. Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord Jesus, you are a great savior for real sinners! I count myself among them. May I be given the grace to always see that clearly. Help me to continually draw nearer and nearer to you. Enable me to see my sin fully and freely forgiven so that I rest and rejoice in your saving grace. Then Lord, so work in me by your Spirit that I freely treat others with the same patience, grace, and compassion I have been given by you. Amen.

¹ The phrase tax collectors and sinners is used multiple times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (As a quick search on bible gateway or a similar app will reveal.) Sometimes both terms are used, but sometimes they are used interchangeably. In Matthew 5:46, Jesus says, *if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same?* In Luke 6:32, he says almost exactly the same thing but substitutes "sinners" for "tax collectors." *"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them."* Sometimes they are interchangeable, but sometimes they are put together as a category or group. When that's the case, they stand for people looked down on by most people in the culture.

² *Theological Dictionary of The New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedreich, Translated by Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 8:104

³ Matthew 21:31-32

⁴ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/jesus-friend-of-sinners-but-how/>

⁵ *The Secular Creed*, Rebecca McLaughlin, pp 33-36