

Meals with Jesus

Eating with the Lost and Found (Luke 15:1-10)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on October 24, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ In the course of this sermon series in the Gospel of Luke, we've been studying the various episodes that center around a meal with Jesus. **We've been noting how these shared meals serve as plot devices to move the story along and to develop characters.** We've seen Jesus make intentional choices to share table fellowship with certain groups of people in order to clarify his mission on earth. He has come to heal the sick; to call sinners to repentance (5:31-32). He has come to seek and save the lost (19:10).
 - **Shared meals clarify his mission. And they also reveal his heart.** They reveal his compassion for the sick, for the hungry, for the outcast and downcast in society. And in this morning's text – in these two parables which are told in response to objections over his practice of table fellowship – **Jesus reveals that his heart is constantly filled with exuberant joy.** And since he is the Son of God – the second person of the Triune Godhead – by extension that means we're learning something about the very heart of God. **God's heart is constantly rejoicing with exuberant joy.**

- ❖ **Now, to be honest, that might be an unfamiliar picture of God for many of us.** We all have a default image of God in our mind's eye. For some of us, when we picture God, we see a glorious, majestic, regal figure. The King of kings and Lord of lords. For others, we see a kind and gentle grandfatherly figure. For others, we see an austere authority figure who holds us to high standards and expectations. But I'll venture to guess that for most of us – when we picture God – **we don't see a him bubbling with joy, gushing with gladness, singing and shouting at the top of his voice in celebration over us.**
 - A joyful, celebratory God doesn't instinctively come to mind. So a verse like **Zephaniah 3:17** will probably come as a shock to you, as it describes the Mighty God who saves like this, *“The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”*
 - **Have you ever pictured God in that way? Singing over you with a booming loud voice.** People only sing with a loud voice when they're happy. When I'm feeling in a good mood (and I'm in the car by myself), I'm likely to be singing to the radio at top of my voice. We do that as a natural expression of our exuberant joy. That's how the prophet Zephaniah is describing God's emotional response towards his beloved people.

- ❖ Admittedly, this is hard for many of us to wrap our head around. We see God has a divine, exalted, authority figure. **And it's hard for us to see an authority figure as someone bubbling with joy.** Chalk it up to the way we were raised or to the culture we grew up in. But the reality is that most of us have difficulty picturing an authority figure as a joyous figure. So we would describe God as holy, as mighty, as sovereign, as loving and merciful, as good and kind – but joyous and exuberant? As someone who sings loudly over those in whom he rejoices? I doubt that would've been the first image in your mind's eye.

- ❖ But that's why we need this morning's text. In Luke 15:1-10, we're supplied with three images of God that I hope will, one on hand, challenge preconceived notions and, on the other hand, comfort those who feel lost or aimless in relation to God. (1) We're going to see a God who welcomes sinners. (2) We'll see a God who seeks the lost. (3) We'll ponder a God who rejoices over the repentant.

The God Who Welcomes Sinners

- ❖ Let's start with the God who welcomes sinners. **We'll begin by considering the prelude to three of the most famous parables of Jesus.** In vv1-2, we're given the background occasion that led Jesus to teach these three related parables all in one sitting. The Parable of the Prodigal Son being the most famous, but we're not planning on studying that one in detail.
 - **We learned in the prelude that the religious leaders of the day were disgusted by Jesus's welcoming attitude towards those who were morally despised and socially excluded.** Listen to vv1-2, *"¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."*
- ❖ So like last week's passage, starting in chapter 14:25, this episode also involves great crowds surrounding Jesus. **But here we're talking specifically about a crowd that consists of the outcasts and reprobates of society.** You have to understand that tax collectors were some of the most despised members of 1st-century Jewish society. They were fellow Jews who worked for the oppressive Roman authorities. Tax collectors were notorious for their dishonesty and despised for betraying their own kinsmen out of greed.
 - **Sinners was a catch-all term to label anyone perceived to have forfeited a relationship with God by their immoral lifestyle or choices that were contrary to the Law.** They were considered the objects of God's just wrath and judgment. The reprobate. Sinners were dismissed members of society. The righteous man would do his best to avoid the path of sinners.
- ❖ **So isn't it ironic that it's the despised and dismissed members of society that are drawing near to Jesus and being warmly received?** Notice how Luke 14 ends in v35. Jesus had been describing the cost of being his disciple and he concluded by saying, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* Apparently, the ones who can hear Jesus are the outcasts and reprobates of society and not the religious leaders of the day.
 - That explains their response to Jesus's welcome of tax collectors and sinners. In v2, it says they grumbled. In the NT, that word only appears here and in Luke 19:7 when the same leaders grumble when Jesus dines in the home of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector. **But that intentional choice of words directly associates Jesus's opponents with Israel's infamous wilderness generation.** Those distrusting, disobedient Jews who rejected the LORD and his anointed leader Moses. The Pharisees and scribes were resembling them in the way they grumbled and rejected God and his anointed leader – Jesus the Messiah.

- ❖ The Pharisees were a populist sect of Judaism that interpreted the Mosaic Law strictly and applied it stringently. But they went beyond Scripture in developing their own rules, their own traditions, and binding everyone’s consciences to maintain them.
 - **At the core, the Pharisees were purists and separatists.** They advocated for a separatist stance towards the unbelieving world. They practiced an ethic of avoidance. **So when it came to the ancient practice of table fellowship, the Pharisees used the table as a means of excluding people.** As a means of preserving a rigid class structure. That’s how they approached a shared meal. It was a way to draw lines and to keep people in their place.
 - That’s why they hated Jesus and grumbled. Because he was upsetting the order. Because he used the table in a completely opposite way. **He approached a shared meal as a means of including people and welcoming them to cross over established lines and barriers.** He intentionally shared table fellowship with those that the rest of society would have rejected.

- ❖ **Now I don’t want to paint a false impression here and have you think that the separatist instinct of the Pharisees meant that they were isolationists.** No, they didn’t draw away from society and hide in their own cloistered monasteries. They were very active in seeking to expand their sect, to add to their numbers.
 - **So, for example, in Matthew 23:15, Jesus acknowledges their efforts to make converts, to make proselytes.** But at the same time, he condemns those efforts. Listen to Jesus, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”*

- ❖ So they were active, aggressive even, in proselytizing, in making converts. **But they were only interested in adding to their number. They weren’t trying to seek and save the lost.** They were building up their tribe, growing their sect. Finding people who already fit the mold or forcing them into their mold – making converts in their own image.
 - Jesus’s idea of welcoming people who had notorious reputations or scandalous backgrounds or shameful histories – extending an invitation to fellowship to scoundrels such as these – that’s offensive to a Pharisee. That's worthy of a grumble.

- ❖ **Look back at their statement in v2, “This man receives sinners.” Those words can be interpreted in two very different ways.** That sentence can be read with two very different tones. **“This man receives sinners?” You would probably say that with your hands on your head and your jaw dropped.** That's the greatest news in the world. It's almost unthinkable that a sinless, blameless, holy God would welcome unholy people into fellowship with him – without waiting for them to first clean up their act.
 - But there's another way to read that sentence. **“This man receives sinners.” That's likely how the Pharisees said it. Probably with arms crossed and teeth clenched.** They grumbled and complained that God would such people give the time of day.

- ❖ Friends, we need to ask how we would read that sentence. What would be your tone? What would be your posture? Would you be amazed at God’s willingness to receive sinners? Or appalled? Or would you be skeptical, finding that hard to believe?
 - It all goes back to how we picture God in our mind’s eye. **Do we imagine God to be an austere, strict disciplinarian?** A Father who is hard to please – whose default posture is to stand back with crossed arms and a stern demeanor?
 - **Or do we picture God to be a warm welcoming Father?** A Father who is slow to anger and quick to forgive – whose default posture is to run to you with open arms and a look of exuberant joy on his face?

- ❖ This is why Jesus goes on to tell the Parable of the Prodigal Son. **The father character illustrates the heart of God – a heart that welcomes all sinners.** Not reluctantly or under compulsion. Not because he has to but because he loves to. He loves to welcome sinners.
 - And don’t get the wrong impression. He doesn’t welcome their sin. Jesus doesn’t excuse or justify our sin. In v7 and v10, it’s clear he is dining with repentant sinners. **These are sinners who have repented of their sins.** That doesn’t mean they don’t struggle with their sins or occasionally fall back into their sins. But they are sinners who have turned their back on a life of sin and seek a life in fellowship with Christ.

The God Who Seeks the Lost

- ❖ That’s the image of God we’re given in the prelude. He’s a God who welcomes sinners. Now as Jesus tells these parables, we’re given another picture. **We see a God who seeks the lost.** Notice how these parables are told specifically *to* the Pharisees and scribes.
 - Look at v3, “*So he told them this parable.*” Remember, Jesus is responding to their objections. He’s explaining why he fellowships with tax collectors and sinners. It’s because he is a God who seeks the lost. That’s his mission.

- ❖ **He goes on to tell a well-known parable about a shepherd who leaves behind ninety-nine sheep, that are safe and sound, to go after the one sheep that has gone astray.** And he gives himself no rest until he finds his sheep and brings it safely home.
 - Commentators note that this parable involving a shepherd and sheep is an allusion to Ezekiel 34. In that prophecy, God confronts the leaders of Israel. He describes them as shepherds who have failed to care for the sheep. God’s people are scattered and lost and no one is looking for them. So finally God says that he will go find his lost sheep.

- ❖ Listen to **Ezekiel 34:16**, “*I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.*” By presenting himself as this Shepherd who seeks lost sheep that are neglected by the religious leaders of the day – Jesus is putting himself in the shoes of God. **He is making a subtle claim to be one with the LORD God.**
 - Now in the second parable, there’s also an emphasis on something precious being lost and on an active search being deployed. This time, in the Parable of the Lost Coin, a woman has ten silver coins and loses one of them. The word for coin refers to a Greek coin that’s worth about a day’s wage for average laborer.

- ❖ Notice how the stakes are raised. The lost item is more valuable to her. The shepherd lost one out of one hundred sheep. This woman lost one out of ten coins. And in the third parable, the father lost one out of two son. The severity of the situation gets progressively worse.
 - **But the big difference between the first and second parable is the additional space given in the second parable to describe the diligence and carefulness of the search.** She's lighting up the entire house. She's sweeping all the floors. She's searching in all the nooks and crannies. Looking underneath all the furniture. **Jesus is trying to stress the great lengths we will go to find precious lost things.**

- ❖ Now there's nothing revolutionary about that observation. But what would've been considered revolutionary was to apply that to God's attitude towards sinners. In those days, it was common for rabbis to teach that God was merciful and would welcome repentant sinners. That's not an original idea. **But the idea that God would actively seek after sinners – that he would take the initiative to go find them in their lostness – now that was a new insight from Jesus.**
 - But as we saw from Ezekiel 34, the idea of God taking up the search for the lost was well established in the Jewish Scriptures. That shouldn't have been a new insight. But sadly, it was. The people of God had grown insular and segregated. They avoided Samaritans and Gentiles. They shunned tax collectors and sinners.

- ❖ These two parables are the needed corrective. **They reemphasize God's initiative and reintroduce him as the Primary Seeker.** We commonly call those non-believers who begin to show interest in spiritual matters "seekers". They're seeking to learn the Bible; seeking to understand spiritual truths; seeking God. So we call them seekers.
 - **Now I'm not against using that label, as long as we acknowledge that it's a human description and not a biblical one.** And as long as we prioritize biblical terms. It's fine as long as we recognize that non-Christians are never labeled in Scripture as seekers but more commonly as **lost people**. It also describes them as spiritually **blind people** (Acts 26:18) or spiritually **dead people** (Eph 2:1).

- ❖ **So in reality, their condition is much worse than merely being lost.** Being lost in a whiteout blizzard in some remote uninhabited forest would be bad enough. The chance of a lost person in that situation finding his way home would be slim. But there's zero chance of a spiritually blind person, in a similar situation, finding his way back home. And what if that person is spiritually dead and immobile? He'll stay lost and never be found.
 - **The only chance of a happy ending is for Someone who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-seeing to go and search for that lost, blinded, immobilized person.** And that's who Jesus reveals himself to be. That's who he reveals God to be.
 - God is not just a God for the righteous; not just a God for the morally upright; not just a God for those who seek after God. **These parables are telling us that God is a God for the lost – for those who would still be lost if he didn't take the initiative to search for us.**

- ❖ Think about how wonderful this news is. **God doesn't wait for us to get our act together. He doesn't wait for us to make the first move.** He takes the initiative. Now, let's be clear, that doesn't mean our pursuit of God – that our searching for God – is unnecessary or meaningless. The third parable particularly emphasizes our role. The prodigal son had to turn around and head back home. He had a responsibility.
 - But I think there's a good reason why the first two parables stress God's initiative (God's active searching), and it's only until the third parable that the lost person's actions are emphasized. Because that's the right order. That's how it works. **We seek because God first sought us.** Just as we love because he first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). **So you could say that God is the Seeker of seekers.** He's the Primary Seeker.

- ❖ This should be a huge encouragement, especially for those of you who feel far from God and far less worthy to be sought out by God. You might feel like your life is of little worth and significance. **But if God seeks you like this shepherd seeks his one sheep or this woman seeks her one coin, do you realize how much that means you're valued in his eyes?**
 - Any owner who loses something will feel the loss personally. **And the aggressiveness of his search will be a reflection of how much he values that which he lost.** If he only looks around for a few minutes – checks behind the couch or under the rug – and then gives up searching, then we'd conclude that whatever it was that he lost wasn't all that valuable or significant. But if he goes on an all-night, intensive search without any rest, then we realize the true value of what went missing.

- ❖ I remember when my oldest daughter was about four or five, she lost her lovie after a trip to the zoo. It was literally a sheep she called Lambie. When we got home and realized Lambie wasn't with us, I didn't need to be told what needed to be done. I immediately drove back and did an all-out search for Lambie, retracing our steps through the zoo. After a long and arduous search, I did find Lambie and returned her to a very joyous and exuberant toddler.
 - But the point is that the great lengths to which I went to find Lambie reflects the great value and worth of Lambie to our family. It would be different if she had lost some random toy from a kid's meal. We're not going back for that. **The extraordinary effort to find a lost object reflects the extraordinary value of that object.**

- ❖ **And in the case of your salvation, not only did Jesus make an extraordinary effort to find you – he also paid an extraordinary price.** He paid with his own blood, laying down his life for you and your salvation. You might feel worthless. You might feel cheap and insignificant. **But perhaps from now on you need to stop letting your feelings determine your worth.** And to begin letting God and his actions – his unrelenting search for you and his willingness to sacrifice his own Son for you – let *that* determine how much you're worth.

- ❖ Now these parables don't just offer a word of encouragement for the lost. There is also great comfort here for the found – for those who are in his flock. **The shepherd's willingness to go after even one lost sheep offers great assurance to the ninety-nine who are safe and sound.** Because they know now how much they are individually valued by their shepherd.

- If he was willing to just count his losses and leave behind the one, then that would instill a fear within the entire flock that, one day, the shepherd might leave me if I start to stray or lag behind. **But knowing God will move heaven and earth to find the one allows the ninety-nine to rest assure that he would do the same for them.**

The God Who Rejoices Over the Repentant

- ❖ Now we've been stressing this image of a God who seeks the lost, but the point of these parable is not actually to highlight the fact that God seeks the lost. It's to highlight the fact that he rejoices over the found. Remember, Jesus is explaining why he does what he does. **Why do I spend so much time with these tax collectors and sinners? Because these are repentant tax collectors and sinners, and I take great delight in their salvation.** That's the third image we see in these parables – a God who rejoices over the repentant.
- ❖ Both the shepherd and the woman have the same impulse to want to share their joy with others. They both call together friends and neighbors to rejoice with them. They celebrate together. They probably throw a party. **The focus is on the exuberant joy we experience when precious lost things are found.**
 - And then Jesus lays out the main point in both v7 and v10. *“⁷Just so, 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.”* Listen to v10, *“¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*
- ❖ **Jesus is saying that the repentance of just one sinner is the cause of great joy in heaven.** Even more than the righteousness of ninety-nine who need no repentance. Now don't get him wrong. Jesus is not saying he could care less about the ninety-nine righteous persons. He's not diminishing the importance of holiness or the spiritual stability of mature believers.
 - **But Jesus is saying that there is a particular joy when the spiritually lost are found and welcomed into fellowship with Christ.** It's like how the healing of a severely sick child in the family brings the parents a particular joy. It's fair to say that you're grateful that your other children are healthy, but you're particularly overjoyed that your sick child is now well.
- ❖ **It's this particular joy of conversion – when the lost are found, when the blind are made to see, when the dead are raised to life – that is cause for celebration in heaven and on earth.** With over 7 billion people on the planet and with the rapid spread of global Christianity, that's why I suggested God's heart is constantly rejoicing with exuberant joy.
 - **Because there is not a moment that goes by without someone somewhere on this planet repenting of sin. So there is always a celebration going on in heaven.** God is always exulting over found sinners with loud singing and a heart of gladness.

- ❖ **Church, think about how this is going to shape our evangelism. We are called to preach a gospel of repentance.** Just like we saw in last week's passage, there is a cost to discipleship. Repentance is part of that cost. It means we turn away from a life of sin, a life of self-sufficiency and self-rule. And we turn to Jesus – to live a life of righteousness, a life that utterly depends on Christ and trusts his Word.
 - That's the gospel of repentance. It's the biblical gospel. **But we don't like to preach it because repentance sounds hard.** It sounds costly. It'll scare people off. Maybe we can bring it up later. When we're talking to non-Christians, inviting them to consider Christ, let's just focus on the pleasant, joyful aspects of the gospel.

- ❖ But that's where we need to be reminded – that repentance is a cause for celebration. **It's our mistake and misperception if we view repentance and self-denial as these unpleasant, irksome aspects of the gospel.** It's our failure to recognize the true joy of repentance if we're prone to avoid any mention of it when we share the gospel.
 - All the angels and all the saints in heaven are rejoicing right now and having a party because some sinner somewhere on this planet just repented and returned to the sheepfold. But for some silly reason we're too shy to bring up repentance.

- ❖ I'm not shy, and I have no reservation, to bring up the topic of the Astros going to the World Series. I'll talk about that with anyone because, in my eyes, *that* is a great cause for celebration. **So this passage serves a needed rebuke of my deficient view of gospel repentance.** Because if I truly saw it as a great cause for celebration, then I would speak of repentance much more often than I do. I would more freely share the gospel.

- ❖ Friends, I wonder if you feel a similar rebuke. If you're starting to realize that your view of repentance and your view of God's heart are both deficient – that they're both missing exuberant joy marked by loud singing and hearts of gladness – then here is an opportunity for you to repent.
 - **Here's an opportunity to join the celebration that's happening right now in heaven.** That, my friends, is one reason why we spend so much time praising in song. It's one way to join the chorus of loud singing over the lost who have been found – over one sinner who repents.