

September 14, 2025

Luke 15:1-10

“Jesus Sinners Doth Receive!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The tax collectors were hated by their fellow Jews. It was no wonder. They represented Rome and they had the authority to investigate you. They often overcharged people and pocketed the surplus and became rich. In some Rabbinic literature they were classified with robbers. In our gospel lesson for this morning they are mentioned with “sinners,” also known as the “wicked” who live in all sorts of deviation from God’s revealed will. Luke begins with the following: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [to hear Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” **Jesus Sinners Doth Receive!**

The fact that the “tax collectors and sinners” were “drawing near to hear” Jesus is crucial to understanding our text. It means that they wished to be in his presence because they were spiritually drawn to him and were coming to believe in him. This idea is expressed in James 4:8, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Moreover, Jesus was sharing a meal with them, implying welcome, identification, and mutual participation. In Scripture, the act of eating together regularly marks a covenant relationship, hospitality, and the recognition of a shared standing before God. **Jesus Sinners Doth Receive!**

While the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus in the sickness of their sin and becoming healthy in him, the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled. Grumbling is an under-the-breath protest. It is not a private passing complaint, but a ripple of discontent that spread through their group, fostering shared resistance or disdain for Jesus and those who were coming to him. Luke uses the verb “grumbled” to magnify the ongoing undercurrent of opposition that surfaced whenever Jesus extended his undeserved kindness to those who were considered “outsiders” because of their sin.

This is a tough lesson. It is tough because we tend to forget that church is really for sick sinners and that we are sick sinners who find their health in Jesus. It is tough because we often create our own degrees of sin to where we might even think that Jesus died for sins like we have done, but not for those outrageous sins that others have done. There have been those who have walked away from the church because they cannot accept that Jesus suffered and died for all sins and all people. Think of it - *all* sins and *all* people. It’s important to realize that our sins are there too. God help us if they’re not.

You mean that there is even forgiveness for the foremost sinner? The apostle Paul doesn’t mince words when he writes in 1 Timothy 1:15, “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.” Paul isn’t feigning humility here. Lest we forget, he had raged against Jesus, accepted the garments of those who stoned Stephen to death, ravaged the church, and entered into house after house, dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. At one time, when he was a Pharisee, he had tried to wipe out Christ and Christianity from the face of the earth, and had to live with that for the rest of his life ... as one who had converted.

It’s hard to accept such truths until one sees that we are all tax collectors and sinners. We are in the same boat with those we may dare to call “little” sinners and “big” sinners. We often like to think that we

are little sinners or in between sinners but, generally speaking, the Scriptures say: “the wages of [all] sin is death.” That really is being in the same boat. And the words of James in his epistle are a wrecking ball: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (2:10).” Thanks be to God that Christ Jesus came into the world to save us. We may not be foremost in the order as Paul said he was, but sin is sin, and it all leads to hell. **Jesus Sinners Doth Receive!**

There was no doubt a variety of sin among the tax collectors and sinners who drew near to Jesus to hear him and even eat with him. There is no doubt variety among us. Also, if you would have been in the Corinthian congregation, back in Paul’s day, you would have been perhaps uncomfortably surrounded by those who had been exceedingly immoral and idolatrous. Indeed, many of them, perhaps by our standards, would have been labeled exceedingly sick sinners who had nevertheless been rescued by Jesus and given health by the forgiveness of sins and the hope of heaven. Also, they still had the sinful flesh, just like us, and were struggling intensely to hold onto the health that they had received from Jesus their Savior.

Paul saw his own past and the thorn in his flesh, whatever it was, as he also saw the poor souls before him that were at stake. He thus preached Christ crucified for himself and to others. It had to be rough and tumble, as we may find it to be so in our own day, but he strove to do what he could humanly do to save the souls of not only those entrusted to his care as an apostle and an under-shepherd of Christ, but also to anyone who would listen. The heart of Paul had been stirred by the perfect heart of Jesus. In our gospel lesson, we are supposed to examine ourselves as the Pharisees and scribes were supposed to examine themselves. The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about the tax collectors and sinners, so he told them two powerful parables: *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*, and *The Parable of the Lost Coin*.

The Pharisees and scribes were invited to imagine that they were shepherds who had lost a sheep. The poor sheep is lost in the wilderness and going to die like a soul that is headed for hell. In Palestinian practice there would have been more than one shepherd to watch the sheep, and if a sheep was lost in the wilderness, one of the shepherds would go out to look for the sheep. When found, the shepherd would carry it back on his shoulders while rejoicing. It was a pain to go into the wilderness and a burden to carry the sheep back, but the poor sheep that was going to be forever lost and dead was found. So, there was every reason to rejoice. Moreover, the Pharisees and scribes were bid to consider whether they were lost sheep or sheep that did not need to repent - lost or found?

*The Parable of the Lost Coin* emphasizes the same ideas. If you lose a valuable coin, will you not look for it diligently until you find it? And when you find it, will you not rejoice? The Pharisees and scribes are to consider whether they would be like the woman, and diligently look for the valuable coin. Will they rejoice over the coin when they find it? We too are supposed to see the lost souls of others as valuable. Will we search for them and rejoice if they are found? Are they valuable because of Jesus?

In the telling of these two complimentary parables, there is the losing, the seeking, the finding, and the people of God rejoicing, which is often in connection with a joyful meal, which signals heaven. By repeating these themes Jesus is striking at their grumbling over him going after the tax collectors and sinners, and even rejoicing over them and eating with them. Jesus is striking at our grumbling as well.

The church and her shepherds have a heart for tax collectors and sinners, since we come from the same place as they came. But when the grumbling begins to well up within us, we should take a pause and consider from what it was that Jesus saved us. We should consider what he gave to save us. A lost sheep in the wilderness or a lost coin in the house is someone to pursue and find. After all, this is what Jesus did for us. At one time, we were all lost sheep or coins. He pursued us in the wilderness. He swept the house. He restored us as his own. **Jesus Sinners Doth Receive!** And having been received, we cannot help but to go out into the wilderness or sweep the house to find and receive others.

The lost are lost until they are found. The sheep did not find its way home. The coin did not cry out, "Here I am!" The lost cannot find their way home to God. They are truly helpless. Someone needs to go into the wilderness or sweep the house to find them, and that task has been given to the church and her shepherds using the mean of grace. In view of the lost and where they are finally headed, there should be an urgency within us to share the gospel with others and invite them to church until they begin to trample our pearls underfoot. Are the tax collectors and sinners worth the time, trouble, and effort to seek them? The Lord sought and found us by spilling his blood and dying for our sins. We once were lost but now are found. **Jesus Sinners Doth Receive!** What a blessed saying that really is when we know that we are sinners who are forgiven.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott