

July 28th 2013 “The Jesus The World Sees” #7 ‘Friend of Sinners’ Luke 15:1-10

Since the beginning of community living every society has always had its groups of ‘undesirables’. People whom the majority tend to avoid and classify under a range of headings. So we have in our society the druggies, bikies, crims, prostitutes, homeless and so on.

In Israel during the time of Jesus it was exactly the same but the religious leaders tended to lump all undesirables into two groups—tax collectors and sinners. The tax collectors worked for the Romans and made their wealth by cheating their own people under the protection of the hated Roman authorities. The sinners were those who were seen as deliberately and persistently breaking God’s law. They stood apart from everyone else who would occasionally transgress God’s law because they did so openly, often, and without remorse.

This group included prostitutes and adulterers. Money lenders who charged interest on loans to fellow Jews. Thieves, murderers, and the blatantly irreligious. Even the physically sick and deformed whose affliction was seen as resulting from sin in them or in their parents.

Once you had been placed into one of these two groups by the Pharisees and religious leaders you were stuck there forever. You were evil and unredeemable. A blight upon society. No Pharisee would seek to convert you or to have compassion upon you, for as a tax collector or a sinner you had gone too far into the place of darkness.

You were also isolated from the rest of the population, for those who dared to associate with you or your family were themselves considered suspect by the Jewish leaders. And if they persisted in befriending you then they faced the ultimate humiliation of being banned from worship in the Temple or synagogue.

This attitude was most intense from the Pharisees who used it to bolster their own standing as good or righteous people, and who believed that they were right before God in such a judgment of others.

Jesus did not hesitate to challenge them about this and particularly did so in a parable He told about two men who went into the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. Luke 18:11-14

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

And Jesus went on to say: ***"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."***

This last comment was a real 'slam dunk' by Jesus against the Pharisees. They earned their living by being more righteous than anybody else. To suggest that a tax collector would leave the Temple in God's good books after his prayer while the Pharisee would not even get a mention was to turn the whole religious system on its head.

But of course that was exactly what Jesus had to do. A point that is made at the start of that parable in Luke 18:9:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

The prevailing view of the religious leaders was that you earned your goodness from God by what you did and that they had definitely earned it and were OK in God's sight, and that others had definitely not earned it and were already condemned. They believed that what they did for God more than covered any sins that might possibly be in themselves and this gave them the right to judge others. So they were confident that they were right and others, particularly the obvious sinners, were not.

That's why they couldn't accept that Jesus could present Himself as a religious teacher and yet mix with obvious sinners. So when He called Matthew the tax collector to be His follower and actually ate with Matthew and His friends, the Pharisees were confused and we read in Matt 9:10-11

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

The interesting thing is that they may have asked the disciples that question, but it was Jesus who answered them. Luke 5:31 says:

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Jesus was not implying here that the Pharisees were spiritually healthy, but that a person must see themselves as a sinner in the sight of a holy God before He can be spiritually healed. A self-righteous man will not realize his need for salvation but a person who sees the sin in His life will.

I will always remember an illustration from the Alpha course about this, where a man was in one of the cathedrals in the UK talking to a minister about sin. Rather like the Pharisees he had the attitude that he did enough good things to merit a good standing before God, especially when he considered how bad other people were. And the minister took him to the wall of the cathedral that rose to meet the roof at a huge height above them. And he asked the man to think of the worst sinner he could. And the man said Hitler. So on the scale of sinners we will put him at the base of this wall, said the minister. Now who do you consider the best person in terms of goodness and dedication to God. And the man said Mother Teresa. So they put her at the top of the scale, right near the roof. And where would you place yourself asked the minister. And the man put himself about 2/3rd up, and that didn't look too bad at all. Until the minister replied that with all her goodness in the sight of a perfect God Mother Teresa was nowhere near the top of the scale for that disappeared through the roof and keep going through the clouds and into space. And suddenly the position of everyone on that scale looked dreadful. And if Mother Teresa could not even come close to reaching the total goodness required to sit in God's family forever, then He had no chance. He too needed a Saviour. The Bible says that we all fall short of God's standard. We all need to be re born as a totally new, completely cleansed person, in order to be pure enough to enter His presence. To enjoy His love, His blessing, His joy for evermore.

So Jesus came into this world to help the sick, but everyone is sick when it comes to sin. But the only ones who will benefit from the coming of Jesus are those who realized how sin sick they are and turn to Jesus for help.

Most of the Pharisees just didn't get that. And they didn't like to hear Jesus talk in that way. So they began to attack Him and call Him names. And in Matt 11:19 Jesus tells us some of the names they were using:

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.'

And there we see it. The name they meant to be a term of derision is one of the best names that Jesus could ever take upon Himself. Friend of sinners.

What the Pharisees got so wrong is that they believed Jesus was countenancing the sin of these people by eating with them. By fellowshiping around a table with them. But in fact Jesus' gracious presence with them brought to them an awareness of their sin and with that awareness, the offer of completed forgiveness and acceptance by God.

An acceptance that is for all sinners, whether we see them as good, bad or in between, for all need His friendship and His forgiveness.

That is why our reading today from Luke 15 is so apt. Consider again the way it begins in v1-2.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Here we see clearly the two groups. Those who really wanted to hear Jesus because they knew just how much they needed Him, and those who felt that they were better than those around them. Those who knew they were sinners and those who thought they were good enough in themselves to please God.

And to both groups Jesus told the same stories of the lost being sought and found. And in both stories there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents. For in the end the response to the Word of Jesus is what counts. If a person does not respond because they think they are good enough already, or maybe because they think they are too bad, or because they don't care, then it doesn't matter how the world sees them. They are lost.

But if a person responds, whoever they are, then the Friend of sinners rejoices with His Father and the angels in heaven over their salvation.

For us who have heard the Gospel it is good news. And it is good news for all who still to meet the one is the friend of sinners.

The challenge for us concerns how hard we are working to make that happen. The Pharisees had some excuse for their judgmental attitude because they were not aware of the need that all have to find forgiveness. We however know that through our own experience of Jesus. Let us make sure that no judgmental attitude on our part will prevent us from praying and seeking the salvation of the lost.

Christ died for all even the marginalized in our society. Let us make sure that our attitude to the lost is that of Christ and not of the Pharisees and that we pray for opportunities to help and not to hinder; to lift up and not to put down; to care and not to condemn out of hand, all for whom Christ, the Friend of Sinners, gave His life.