

Title: The Merciful
Text: Luke 15.1-7
Theme: The beautiful mercy of God
Series: Luke
Prop Stmtnt: Repentance unleashes the tidal wave of God's mercy.

Could we with ink, the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made,
were every stalk on earth a quill and every many a scribe by trade,
to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll, contain the whole tho' stretched from sky to sky.

Read Text:

1. **Who are the tax collectors and sinners?** (1a)

Carpet baggers and scallywags are derogatory terms that were birthed in the south in the days after the Civil War. A carpet bagger described a political opportunist who was from the north who moved to the south in order to take advantage of the chaos and destruction in the confederate states following their defeat for his own political resume. The actual term described the type of bag that a person had in which they carried their goods as they traveled south. So, they were now in the south, but they did not belong there and were only interested in their own advancement. A scallywag referred to a person who was from the south, but was northern in loyalty. They betrayed their own kind and now were being rewarded for their betrayal because the north had won. If you lived in the south then and used either term to describe someone, it would be fitting to spit on the ground to express your disdain for their character.

Israel was in the middle of a civil war when Rome used the occasion to move in and assume control. Occupying another's country takes a lot of manpower, so Rome tried to use local people as much as possible. Rome hired Jews to collect Roman taxes from the Jews. If you were hired to collect taxes from your own people then you were taking advantage of your own people's problems to advance your standing. A Jew who would sell himself out to Rome like that, was a new low of scumbag or a scallywag.

You could make decent money as a tax collector, but what good would it do when no one of your own kind wanted anything to do with you? You were a disgusting blight, a pox, a virus, and infection to be excised and shunned. Tax collectors were not welcome in much of Jewish life. Sinners understood that. They were not welcome either. Pharisees made no secret of their spite for sinners. Some of you, when driving south to FL, are tempted to drive through Indiana so you don't have to go through Ohio. That is how kosher Jews would go around Samaria so they wouldn't be tainted by the sinners there.

Sinners are the 2nd group that Luke names in 15.1. What did Luke mean by that? This is the 3rd time that Luke groups these two phrases together (5.30; 7.34). This was a known accusation against Jesus that he associated with tax collectors and sinners. Sinners were reprobates.

Sinners were the underbelly of Jewish society. These were the heathens, degenerates, sexually immoral, prostitutes, thieves, idolaters, swindlers and this word was even used for murderers.

2. Why did the tax collectors and sinners want to hear Jesus? (1b)

Luke does not say how many tax collectors and sinners were drawing near in order to listen to Jesus, but it was enough of them that it was an identifiable group. This group who were really hated and despised were drawing near to Jesus so they could hear him. The last time Jesus had healed anyone was at the beginning of chapter 14 and that healing took place in the home of a Pharisees' ruler on a sabbath, meaning that the entire scene was likely a set-up in order to trap Jesus. Before that, it was chapter 11. My point is that the ministry of Jesus was no longer characterized by doing amazing miracles. These sinners were not following because of the wow factor of miracles, nor because Jesus was handing out food. The text says that they drew near for the purpose of hearing Jesus. They wanted to hear what he had to say. Why? What is it about Jesus and his teaching that causes people like this to want to be near him and listen to him?

What are some obvious answers? Jesus always speaks the truth. That is refreshing and probably as unusual then as it is now. But there are plenty of people who don't want to hear the truth and plug their ears. So yes, Jesus always speaks the truth but the response of the tax collectors and sinners seems to be more than that. We could say that Jesus not only spoke the truth, but he lived the truth. Once again, that is refreshing and probably as unusual then as it is now too.

There are three things in this text that tell us why these people (of all people) were trying to get close to Jesus in order to hear him. The first clue is seen in the accusation that the Pharisees and scribes hurled at Jesus. Look at what they say in v.2. *"This man receives sinners and eats with them."* Did Jesus approve of their sin? Absolutely not! Did Jesus excuse their sin and act like it was no big deal? Absolutely not! But the fact that Jesus did not approve of their sin did not mean that he didn't care for them. He received them and ate with them. That means that Jesus made room in his life for these outcasts and sinful people.

What does that look like for you? Do you make any room in your life for "sinners"? I am going to challenge you to do something. Before the end of the year, have a meal (preferably in your home) with a "sinner." That is, with someone who needs to hear the gospel. Make them important to you. You may or may not be able to share the gospel with them, but this would be a great step in inviting them into your world and you stepping into theirs'. Jesus has been accused several times of being associated with the tax collectors and sinners, so obviously the skalawags and scumbags knew that this was someone to whom they mattered.

The second clue in the text is from the characters in the 3 parables. The first parable is about a shepherd and his lost sheep. I will dig into this a bit more next Sunday, but it is helpful for us to know that shepherds were not at the top of the economic food chain. Shepherds were just about the bottom rung of the ladder. Here Jesus is talking beautifully and radiantly about a shepherd and a rather poor one at that. The guy has a 100 sheep, which is not a large herd. The

owner of the herd is the shepherd and does not send out a servant to find the lost one, but goes himself. Again, more on this next week, but the hero in this story is a social outcast which would resonate with these people who lived with the spite of the religious leaders towards them. The fact that Jesus uses people like them in his stories means that they are seen and known by Jesus. They are precious in his sight.

Isn't that amazing? In spite of your failures and foibles, Jesus sees you. He knows you. He knows your insecurities and your lame attempts at trying to be something. You do not have to be something or someone to be seen by Jesus. Some of you are so desperate to be seen, to be known, to be admired, to be respected, to be esteemed, to be envied, etc. Seriously, that is what SO much of social media is about. It's sad. It's really sad. It's easy to see the girl who tries to dress seductively and say, "Desperate doesn't look good on you." But isn't that what we are all tempted with? Aren't we all tempted by attention, respect, admiration? I think that if we really believed what God says to us about how much he loves us and really grasp what Jesus did for us on the cross, then so much of our emptiness and insecurities would be resolved.

A third reason is found at the end of chapter 14. Luke did not write this book with chapters and verses. It was one account without divisions. Chapters and verses were added hundreds of years later to help people who studied the Bible find different places with greater ease. Chapters and verses help for that, but sometimes they create a division in our brain where there is none. This is an example of that. How does chapter 14 end? Jesus laid out the terms for following him. If you are going to follow him then you had to be willing to follow him, esteem him, prefer him above all, family, friends, job, even your own life because Jesus is worth it. People who claim to follow Jesus but who are not willing to prefer him like that, are not followers of Christ and are worthless. Then Jesus said (end of v.35) "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." This is a phrase that Jesus used to describe spiritual hearing or hearing with your heart. Luke then describes what kind of people were answering that call. Who is described as having ears to hear? *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him."*

I've often said that Jesus is the king of the upside-down kingdom. The truth is, he and his kingdom are right-side up and our kingdoms are upside-down. The value system of Jesus is so different than how we naturally assume the way things are.

3. Why did the Pharisees and scribes grumble?

The Jewish nation was governed by Rome, who tried to govern through local authorities if possible. Rome set up the Herod dynasty as the kings and Rome allowed the Sanhedrin (governing council) to have influence over the people, particularly in religious matters. The Sanhedrin was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees were the more liberal aristocrats and the Pharisees were more of conservative and common man's religious representatives. Scribes were men who knew how to read and write and were tasked with meticulously copying the Scriptures, interpreting the law, serving the Pharisees and serving in government roles. The Pharisees and scribes were often connected together and had influence in the synagogues and in the Sanhedrin. The Sadducees and Pharisees were usually in

opposition to one another. Even though they tended to hate one another, they were unified in their hatred of Christ. Our view of the Pharisees is pretty bad because they are generally the enemies of Christ and are often exposed by Jesus as being hypocrites. But they did not start out that way. The Pharisees formed because there were a group of men who were concerned that the nation was once again, ignoring God's law. These guys wanted to bring their nation back to God. They spent a lot of time studying the OT for the purpose of determining how it actually applies. For example, what does it mean not to work on the Sabbath? Are you allowed to get out of bed, since that requires exertion? Are you allowed to lift food to your mouth since that requires effort? Can you walk? How far? Two things happened. 1) Over time, their technical and detailed lists of application became more important than the law itself. Part of their conflict with Jesus was over the fact that he pointed out that they were ignoring the entire point of the law. 2) Because of their influence in society, in the synagogues and then in the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and to some degree the Scribes, were placed into positions of political power.

What tends to happen to people who gain power? This is not always the case, but it sadly is the case most of the time. People who get into power, usually try to use that power to hold on to power and/or to gain more power. They may have gotten into power in order to do good things and to help people, but the story of the power and politics is how power becomes levers to maintain power. That is exactly what happened to the Pharisees. They started out as the common man's political party, but became more and more authoritative and power hungry.

By the way, this is one of the reasons why George Washington was so unusual. He walked away from the presidency and by all accounts had enough clout to become like a king. The Pharisees had more than a taste of power and along comes Jesus who threatens their esteem and threatens their power base because the people realizing that the Pharisees were not all that they pretended to be and Jesus was the real deal. There were a couple like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who had integrity, but the majority of them were threatened by Jesus because he threatened their power. So, of course they grumbled. And they grumbled because he associated with people they despised, but underneath that was their fear over losing power. This fear was becoming a panic when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and they said, *"Look, the world has gone after him."* (John 12:19)

So, in this crowd this a group of tax collectors and sinners and a group of Pharisees and scribes. Consider the dynamics at play. The tax collectors and sinners are the outcasts as far as the Pharisees and scribes are concerned. But Jesus makes room for them in his heart and ministry. The tax collectors and sinners knew they were written off by the Pharisees and scribes and probably had a mutual feeling toward them. At the same time, Jesus was a religious leader, to put it mildly. Jesus is the very Son of God. He is holiness, righteousness, purity embodied. Why are the sinners drawn to him and the religious leaders threatened by him? Why are the sinners attracted to Jesus but are not attracted to the Pharisees?

The answer to this question is also a major contributor to why the Pharisees and scribes grumbled so much about Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes did not understand grace. If you are in a position of power or influence, how do you leverage that? What keeps you in power? How

do you get people to do what you want? There are basically 3 ways: 1) Money – you control people because you pay them. 2) Fear (and related to that) Shame. If you don't do what I demand, I will crush you or expose you. Both of those are powerful and are effective at getting people to do what you want. But there is a 3rd one. 3) Love. This is what I have been trying to help you see, because this is the heart of these three stories in chapter 15.

The lost sheep is sought after and is found. The shepherd does not berate the sheep and beat it all the way home, whining about how inconvenienced he was that this imbecile animal cost him a night's sleep. The shepherd does not shame him in front of the other sheep in order to make an example out of him. He lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (v.5) He loves his sheep. The same thing happens with the father and his prodigal son. There's no shame.

We can only be saved from our sins if we can be forgiven of our sins. Jesus died on the cross as the full and final payment for our sin. God loves us so much that instead of shaming us, he gave us salvation on the basis of his grace. Grace means to give somebody something that they do not deserve. People who have received grace from God are able to be gracious towards others. People who live only by their rules are threatened by grace because it isn't fair. What people like that (Pharisees) fail to understand is that they don't measure up to God's laws. In fact, they don't measure up to their own laws, they just don't want to admit it. We cover up our failures because we fear shame. But in order to be loved, you have to be known. That is true in human relationships. If you are going to experience the love of God, you have to be honest about what he already knows. What he knows is the truth and he sent Jesus to die for you, anyway.

Grace threatens people who live according to shame. They do not know what to do with it. Think about it. Do you want people to be influenced by you because they fear you or because they love you? What encourages people to love you? People are drawn to you when they know that you really make space in your heart for them. Jesus did that for the tax collectors and sinners, but he also did that for the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus knew that behind their robes and titles, they were really just lost sheep who needed to be found. They were lost sons who needed to come home to the real Father.

4. **Which of these sounds like you?**

Tax collector/sinner? – Do you want to hear the truth from Christ? He loves you enough to tell you the truth. You need to acknowledge your sin and trust in Christ alone to save you. Your sin will destroy you and came so that did not have to be your story.

Pharisee/scribe? – Do you look down on those who are inferior to you? Do you grumble at those you differ with? Who are not as "righteous" as you pretend to be? Are you tired? Tired of living trying to control others with your displeasure or causing them to fear because of your shame. There's a place at the table for those who admit their need of Christ because of their obvious sins and for those who admit their need of Christ because of their sins of self-righteousness.