

Trinity 3  
Micah 7:18-20  
1 Peter 5:6-11  
Luke 15:1-32  
Jesus Sinners Doth Receive  
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"And the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

The Pharisees and scribes thought they were criticizing Jesus, yet these self-righteous hypocrites inadvertently proclaimed the Gospel in its sweetest form. "This man Jesus receives sinners and eats with them." Jesus sinners doth receive. O what great news! This sentence summarizes the great mercy of our God! That these religious big shots thought it a criticism proves that they thought more of themselves and their own works than the Word of God to which they were supposed to be devoted. The prophet Micah writes, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old."

Is this not the nature of God's mercy? He receives sinners, who deserve nothing but temporal and eternal punishment! Certainly, this is the heart of the Gospel. The good news, that though our sins were like scarlet, Christ makes them white as snow with his dear forgiveness. The Holy God accepts sinners, joins himself with them, eats with them. He is a friend to sinners.

But what is a sinner? Seems like a silly question. A sinner sins. What is sin? Sin is disobedience to God. God commands that we love him with our whole heart, soul, and mind and that we love our neighbor as ourselves. When we love and devote ourselves to things other than God, we sin. When we are disobedient, lazy, unfaithful, hateful or quarrelsome, we sin. It is a sin to take God's name in vain and to neglect hearing God's preaching. It is a sin to disobey parents and other authorities. It is a sin to hate your neighbor, to have sex outside of marriage, to take what doesn't belong to you (no matter how insignificant it is), to talk about someone behind his back to hurt his reputation, to be discontent with what you have.

And who is a sinner? Well, everyone! St. Paul quotes the Psalmist, "None is righteous, no, not one; none understands; no one seeks God." and again he writes, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:10b-11, 23) So it is certainly true that everyone is a sinner. Without exception.

And yet, it is very important that you be *made* a sinner in order that Christ receive you. Now, I am not saying that you need to go out and do horrendous acts and purposefully disobey God. No, you do that enough without a special effort. I mean, you must be a sinner in your own mind. Earlier in Luke's Gospel Christ is eating with Matthew (Levi), his new disciple and former tax collector. And as he sat eating with him and his tax collector friends a group of Pharisees and scribes approached him and asked, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (5:30-32)

Now, obviously the tax collectors are sinners. They've betrayed their people to make money extorting money from their countrymen. And yet, the Pharisees and scribes are sinners too. But they don't see themselves that way. They refuse to be made sinners. So how are you made a sinner then? St. Paul tells us, "Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead." (Rom. 7:7-8)

The Law of God makes you a sinner. Obviously, you are a sinner without God's Law. If you disobey God, you are guilty of sin whether or not you've heard the law. "The Law of God makes you a sinner" means the Law accuses you of your sin. It points out what you've done wrong. The law always accuses. If you feel secure, if you think you're a pretty good person, who can stand before God on your own merits, then look at God's Law. Read the Ten Commandments and see if you have kept them. God's Law brings to light what you would rather leave in the dark. It exposes sin and proves the sinner to be a sinner.

These are the sinners Jesus receives. Sinners who have been proven to be sinners. Sinners who see that their sin hurts them, causes them to be lost, even dead. These are the sinners, whom Jesus lifts onto his

shoulder and returns to the pasture. Sin kills. Not only that, it sends to hell. So the Law of God must do its work to make the sinner a sinner to be received by Jesus.

Jesus tells three parables to teach this lesson to the disciples. The parables show God's love for sinners, even before they know that they are sinners, even before the Law has made them real sinner. In the first two, a shepherd loses one out of one hundred sheep and a lady loses one out of ten silver coins. Both leave what they have and search diligently for what they've lost. The lost sheep is completely helpless. It sits in the thicket and hides, waiting to be either eaten by a roaring lion or rescued by its shepherd. The coin is even more helpless. It just sits. It can't even bleat. Yet the shepherd does not return without his sheep on his shoulders and the woman does not rest until she has swept the house, searched every dark corner with a lamp, and found her lost coin.

These stories teach of God's great compassion. Like someone, who has lost something of great value, so does God dedicate himself to regain what is lost to him by our sins. Yet, what does this look like in real life? The lost sheep and coin are those lost in their sin. They do not believe the Gospel. They likely don't even know that their sin is a problem. They are alienated from God. And how does God seek them out? Through his Word. God's Word calls sinners to repentance and faith. As the woman lights a lamp to expose the coin out of the darkness, so does God's Word light the path to repentance and forgiveness. The Psalmist writes, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (119:105)

First God preaches Law. Normally, he does this through people, men, pastors. The Law exposes the sinner for what he is, a sinner. It diagnoses the problem. It is like the shepherd discovering the little lamb lying in a ditch entangled in thorns. It tells you, you are stuck. Then God preaches the Gospel. The Gospel is good news. It tells you that Jesus receives sinners. That God is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Gospel tells you that God is not angry at you. You are not God's enemy. You are his lost lamb. His hidden coin. The Gospel tells you that even when you were in utter darkness, and didn't even realize the severity of your sin, God loved you and desired to bring you to himself.

At the end of each lesson Jesus says, "There is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents." The entire angelic hosts rejoice. They joy in God's good pleasure and it is God's good pleasure that sinners repent. And everytime a single sinner repents, Christ tells us, the angel choirs sing glory to God.

But what does it mean to repent? To repent doesn't simply mean to feel bad. You can feel bad for your sins without repenting. To repent means to turn. To turn from your sin in faith to Christ. The repentance which causes the angels to cheer is one that turns from unbelief to trust in God's mercy, to believe that no matter how filthy your sins are, God accepts you with forgiveness.

The lost sheep and coin are sinners, who's sin was exposed to them, who were brought to repent of their sins and trust in Christ's free forgiveness. They are sinners who alienated themselves from the flock of Christ and were brought back to eat and drink at the feast of salvation.

What does it look like to be received by Jesus and to eat with him? In the final parable, Jesus tells us of a boy, who was lost. He separated himself from his father and family, so that he could live a sinful life in a foreign country. And when he returned naked and broke, his father had compassion on him. He ran to him, called him his son, embraced him, clothed him and put a ring on his finger. And he ordered the fattened calf killed for a feast. He didn't silently welcome him back through the back door in fear that others would see and talk. He invited everyone to rejoice with him. Even the bitter brother, the father goes out to invite in. He is not happy to have his family divided, even as the shepherd could not stand one of the one hundred sheep to be missing or the woman one of her ten coins.

What does this look like in real life? The church invites sinners. Real people, who commit real sins, the church invites. She invites them to join the congregation, join in worship, hear the forgiveness of sins from Christ himself, and yes, eat and drink Christ's true body and blood. Fornicators, slanders, murderers, those who have alienated themselves from Christ and his church for months and years. The church calls them to repentance. Calls them to believe that Jesus receives them.

Every time we gather here in church, we are rejoicing with God that his lost sheep have been found. Everytime we confess our sins and believe the forgiveness spoken for Christ's sake, God hears his angels singing for joy. And when we eat and drink Christ's body and blood in the Supper, we are dining with our

Savior, together, in a feast of celebration that though we were lost we are now found and though we were dead, we are alive.

The Church will always receive sinners, because the church is the congregation of sinners, who were lost and separated from God, whom God called to repentance and faith. There is not a single member of this church who was not lost. Not a single one of us who is without sin. And each one of us is found by Christ, who receives us, forgives us, strengthens us, and rejoins us into his flock, his household.

Did you get lost this week? Did you sin against God? Did God's Law expose your guilt? It is good that you are here. Jesus receives you. He forgives you. His blood washes you clean of your sin. He even eats with you in this company of saints. And when our Lord returns to judge the living and the dead, you will find him receiving you into heaven with the same mercy he shows to you in his Word and Sacrament.

Amen.