

Sourness and Singing

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[0 : 00] Well, turn with me, please, to the passage that we read in Luke chapter 15. Luke chapter 15, and reading again at verse 10.

Luke 15 from verse 10. Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who depends.

There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Ten years ago, I read Philip Yancey's book, What's So Amazing About Grace?

Now, up until then, I lived thinking that I had to work for God's affection. I had to work for God's acceptance. And I had to work for God's approval.

But in this book, Philip Yancey speaks about how much God loves his undeserving people with this incredible, undeserved, one-way love, this amazing grace.

[1 : 09] And at one stage, Philip Yancey writes, God gave up his own son rather than gave up on humanity. God gave up his own son rather than gave up on humanity.

But the book doesn't stop there because Yancey also focuses on the church's calling to both declare and display the same love, the same grace, to those who seem to be beyond redemption.

And at this point, he writes, grace is Christianity's best gift to the world. Do you ever think of that? That grace is Christianity's best gift to the world.

Well, tonight, I want to focus on this glorious theme of grace as we find it in Luke 15, verses 1 to 10. And we're going to divide this passage under two headings, the sourness of the religious leaders, verses 1 and 2, and the singing of heaven in verses 3 to 10.

First, then, we have the sourness of the religious leaders, verses 1 and 2. The religious leaders, we see here, grumble about the people Jesus welcomes. The religious leaders grumble about the people Jesus welcomes.

[2 : 17] In verse 1, we're told the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus. Luke draws our attention here to these social outcasts. He speaks here about tax collectors.

Now, nobody enjoys paying taxes. There's nothing I hate more than when I'm filling out my self-assessment form, I hand it into HMRC, I then get a letter back a month or two later saying, I need to pay above and beyond the tax that they previously estimated.

And taxation was extremely unpopular in the days of Jesus. First century Palestine was under Roman occupation, and the Romans exerted their authority and their control, and their influence by imposing these heavy and crippling taxes on these people.

And they employed Jewish men to tax their fellow Jews. As such, these Jewish tax collectors were seen as traitors and turncoats.

They were stigmatized. They were ostracized. They were criticized by their community. A tax collector couldn't enter the synagogue. He was unclean.

[3 : 24] A tax collector couldn't enter into a law court to give testimony. He was dishonest. That's the kind of people mixing with Jesus. But Luke also speaks here about the sinners.

Now, the word sinner here refers to anyone whose behavior was morally dubious. These were people who had a bad name, a bad character, a bad reputation.

They had a name. They had a character. They had a reputation that nobody allowed them to forget. A name, a character, a reputation that nobody allowed them to shake themselves free from.

And they, too, were stigmatized and criticized and ostracized by their community. They couldn't enter the synagogue. And so Luke is telling us here about these two groups of people, the tax collectors and sinners, who were rejected by their communities because of their professions and because of their reputations.

And Luke tells us that they were gathering around Jesus to hear him. That's a strange place to go. Philip Yancey says in his book about a young woman who was a prostitute and who was engaged in it in order to fund an ongoing drug problem.

[4 : 39] And somehow she came across a church worker. And the church worker had said to her, why don't you ask the church for help? Why don't you go to the church for help? And this young woman said, why would I go to the church?

I was already feeling bad about myself and the church would just make me feel worse. And we might expect Jesus here to make these people feel worse about themselves. We might expect Jesus to applaud the behavior of those who rejected the tax collectors and sinners.

We might expect Jesus to give them a heavy dose of high-handed guilt. But he welcomes them. And he makes them feel human again as he treats them with love, with respect, with dignity, with concern, and with compassion.

These people flock to Jesus knowing that here's someone who won't criticize them. Here's someone who won't stigmatize them. Here's someone who won't ostracize them.

Instead, he's willing to envelop them with his compassion and grace and love. Perhaps these people knew that this was a Jesus who told a story about two men who went up to pray.

[5 : 47] A Pharisee and a tax collector. And the tax collector, as he cried, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner, went home justified. Maybe they knew that.

And in verse 2, we're told the religious leaders complained about those who were gathering around Jesus. We read, and the Pharisees and the teachers of the law grumbled, muttering, saying, This man, this fellow, receives sinners and eats with them.

Look at how they speak about the Son of God. God in the flesh. God incarnate. They look at what he's doing, and they display no joy. They display no admiration. Instead, they scornfully mutter, This fellow, this nobody who thinks he's a somebody, this fellow receives sinners.

You see, the Pharisees taught a doctrine of salvation by separation. They believed God accepted a person on the basis of good behavior. They believed if you lived a good, clean, moral, church-going life, then God would reward you.

God would love you. God would accept you. God would welcome you into his presence, into his people, into his paradise. And they believed that if you associated with anyone who didn't live a good life, a clean life, a moral life, a church life, you were putting yourself in spiritual danger.

[7 : 10] You were contaminating yourself. You were guilty by association. And that is what Jesus is doing. And now they see Jesus welcoming the tax collectors, welcoming the sinners, and he's not only welcoming them, he's eating with them.

And it takes their breath away. Because Jesus isn't simply acknowledging these people. Jesus isn't simply associating with these people, giving them a nod as he walks past them in the supermarket, giving them a nod as he has a meal with some of his friends.

Not at all. Jesus is accepting these people. And he enjoys fellowship with them, and friendship with them, and companionship with them, as he eats with them.

That's why the religious leaders muttered, this fellow receives sinners. And isn't that a lovely description of Jesus' ministry? This fellow receives sinners.

Is that the ministry that overawes you as you consider Jesus this evening? That he came into this world for those who had failed him, and those who had rebelled against him?

[8 : 20] And when we feel bad, and when we feel guilty, and when we feel ashamed, the gospel tells us that Jesus is full of grace, and will receive us, and will forgive us, and will grant us eternal life, and forgiveness, and joy when we turn to him.

But the Pharisees can't understand any of this, and so they grumble about Jesus. Previously, they'd muttered about Jesus' followers, but now they're growing bolder. And so they decide, well, we're going to grumble and mutter about Jesus.

They're growing bolder as they do this. So here's Jesus in this crowd, among these people, with these sour-faced religious men looking on. And they're muttering under their breasts about Jesus, murmuring, murmuring, murmuring.

And any time Jesus looks at them, any time Jesus goes near them, any time Jesus approaches them, they just scowl and walk away. They have no time for such a saviour.

So the religious leaders grumble about the people Jesus welcomes. And today, friends, we are being encouraged in this passage to follow Jesus' example, and not the example of the Pharisees.

[9 : 33] See, Jesus was criticised for receiving the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus was criticised for loving those who were looked down on as being immoral and unworthy and unclean.

And the reason the religious leaders criticised Jesus was because they'd forgotten that they too needed the grace of God. They needed the grace of God as much as the tax collector and sinner.

They looked on the tax collectors and the sinners as being so unworthy, but they didn't see themselves as being unworthy. They thought they were pretty good. They were like little Jack Horner sitting in the corner saying, what a good boy am I.

And when they saw Jesus associating with these unworthy people, they didn't sing. They didn't rejoice. They scowled and they rebuked him. Friends, the gospel teaches that the church is made up of and is for broken and messy people.

That is who the church is for. The church is for those who feel bad and guilty and know they deserve the anger of God. The church is for those whose past conduct makes them feel ashamed.

[10 : 45] The church is for those who have regrets over things they have said and not said, done and not done, thought and not thought. The church is for those who want a new beginning and a fresh start.

The church is for those who long to run to Jesus because he welcomes the guilty and he forgives those who've done wrong and he loves those who are unlovable. The church is for those who long to bask in the glorious freedom from condemnation that's available in and through Jesus.

The religious leaders in Luke 15 didn't listen to Jesus. They didn't love Jesus. They didn't follow Jesus because they didn't think they needed Jesus.

And that resulted in them grumbling about those who knew that they needed Jesus and came to Jesus in order to receive his grace.

Friends, God wants us to know this evening that we desperately need Jesus. And we desperately need his grace.

[11 : 54] And when we come to him and when we've received his grace, the very last thing any of us should ever do is matter about others who may be wanting to come to the same Jesus.

God wants us to know that we need Jesus, we need his grace. And when we come to him and receive that grace, the very last thing we should ever do is matter about others who are wanting to receive that same grace.

I love the preacher Ray Ortlund. And I saw that he wrote something last night where he said that his church is the church which people go to which no other church wants them.

His church is the church for people that every other church would want to push out the door. And I wonder, friends, is that your vision for the Point congregation?

That you want to be the church made up of the people that maybe no other church would want? I know that's my hope for the high free.

[13 : 04] And I hope that's your hope for Point. This brings us second to the singing of heaven in verses 3 down to 10. And here we see that Jesus speaks about the rejoicing in heaven over those who turn to him and come to him.

Jesus speaks about the rejoicing in heaven over those who turn to him and come to him. Jesus responds to the grumbling of the religious leaders by telling three parables. And we're going to focus on the first two this evening.

He tells a story about a lost sheep, verses 3 to 7. Then a story about a lost coin, verses 8 to 10. And finally, that well-known story of a lost son in verses 11 to 32.

He's using everyday events, everyday objects to communicate deep and glorious spiritual truths and realities. First, Jesus tells a story about a lost sheep, verses 3 to 7.

And he speaks about the sheep getting lost in verses 3 and 4. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them? Now, there's nothing unusual there, nothing out of the ordinary there.

[14 : 12] Many of you have probably kept sheep or known people who have sheep, and sheep have this tendency to wander as they go from one clump of grass to another clump of grass to another clump of grass until they find themselves separated from the shepherd and the other sheep.

They find themselves out of the flock and out of the fold. And that's what's happening here. This sheep has got lost. And Jesus then describes the shepherd going to look for the sheep.

Verse 4. Does he not leave the 99 in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? Jesus is saying that in spite of the dangers, in spite of the hardships, in spite of the difficulties, the shepherd goes after the sheep.

And he looks for the sheep. And he keeps looking for the sheep until he finds the sheep. He will endure any suffering. He will make any sacrifice in order to get the wayward sheep back.

And Jesus then speaks about the shepherd finding the sheep in verse 5. And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. Isn't that a wonderful image? He doesn't come behind the sheep pushing it along, beating it along.

[15 : 26] Neither does he go ahead of the sheep saying come along, keep up, or even holding out some treat for the sheep to come after him. Instead the shepherd tenderly lifts the lost sheep onto his shoulders and carries it all the way home.

And Jesus then focuses in verse 6 on the shepherd calling for a celebration over his found sheep. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.

It's a ridiculous image. It's an extravagant image. Here's a party. Here's a celebration. Here's the town coming to a standstill over a great event. And what is the event?

A lost sheep has become a found sheep. That's extravagant grace.

And Jesus closes with a word of instruction in verse 7. Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who have no need for repentance.

[16 : 34] This is the punchline of the parable. You see, in Jesus' day, there was a Jewish proverb which said, There is joy in heaven when a man who provokes God perishes.

Joy in heaven over a man who provokes God perishing. And Jesus turns this parable on its head saying, There is joy in heaven not when a man who provokes God perishes, but when a man who has provoked God comes to God.

is saved by God. Here's a God of grace. Here's a God of love. Here's a God of acceptance. Here's a God of mercy. Here's a God of compassion.

Here's a God of this forgiveness that you and I sung off in Psalm 32. And we might be used to the words of Psalm 32, but Jesus is saying, Don't be used to Psalm 32.

This is a God of extravagant grace. Marvel at him. And Jesus then tells the story about a lost coin in verses 8 down to 10.

[17 : 41] And again, he speaks about a coin that goes missing in verse 8. Or what woman having 10 silver coins if she loses one coin? Now this coin would have been a day's wages.

And Jesus is speaking to people who are living in an economically crippling time. A day's wages would have left them fighting for survival.

They know this woman has lost a valuable amount of money. A significant amount of money. Something very precious to her. This coin is something she can hardly bear to be without.

And Jesus describes the woman looking for the coin in verse 8. Does she not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? Now houses in first century Palestine tended to have very small windows or maybe no windows at all with earthen floors.

The image you might want to have is of a typical Western Isles black house from a number of centuries ago. And as such it would have been very difficult to find this small coin in this very dark musty environment.

[18 : 51] And so the woman does three things. She lights the lamp, she sweeps the house, and she searches carefully. I've had a terrible tendency to lose things.

I lose things all the time and it was coming up to my car's MOT a few years ago and I couldn't find the MOT certificate and I couldn't find the registration forms.

I couldn't find any of the car's documentation and it was the night before the MOT was due. And I looked everywhere in the man's for this documentation.

I looked in every single book in the study flicking through all the pages. Everything took second place to finding this documentation. And here's Jesus making it very clear that this woman has been thorough and she's rearranging her priorities to find this valuable and precious coin.

Her whole life is turned upside down. Everything takes second place until she gets the coin. Jesus then speaks about the woman finding the coin and calling for a celebration over the found coin.

[19 : 57] Verse 9 And when she has found it she calls together her friends and her neighbours saying rejoice with me for I found my coin that I had lost. This woman had lost something precious to her something valuable to her and when she finds it she calls the whole community together and she says I can't keep this joy to myself.

I can't keep the excitement to myself. Come with me celebrate with me. The coin I lost has been found. And again Jesus closes with another word of instruction verse 10 Just so I tell you there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Again Jesus is pressing home this glorious truth that the happiest days of heaven are the days when people embrace the God who's been seeking them.

The happiest days of heaven are the days when people embrace the God who's been seeking them. So Jesus speaks about the rejoicing in heaven over those who turn to him and come to him.

Now friend this is an evangelistic text and it's pressing us to make a decision about Jesus. It's pressing us this evening to do business with Jesus.

[21 : 16] You see the gospel tells us that we're all lost. We've wandered away from God like wayward sheep and we've gone our own way. We've done things that have disobeyed God and disappointed God and displeased God and we find ourselves cut off from God, estranged from God, a broken relationship between us and God with no hope of eternal life with God.

But the gospel also tells us that God lovingly seeks out his lost people. And we see in these verses that Jesus' love is an act of love. The shepherd didn't sit at home crying over his lost sheep.

The woman didn't sit at home crying over her lost coin. And Jesus didn't remain sitting in heaven upset over our lost condition. He came into this world and he didn't rest until he done everything necessary for the door to life to be opened to any who would respond to the gospel of grace.

He did everything necessary, everything sufficient to save any who come to him. And we see in these verses that Jesus' love is a self-denying love.

The shepherd brought the sheep home on his shoulders. The woman lit a lamp. She swept her house. She searched diligently until she found her coin.

[22 : 41] And Jesus didn't spare himself when it came to seeking and saving his people. He went all the way to death and death on the cross for his people's benefit and for their eternal blessing.

And we see in these verses that Jesus' love is a deep love. The woman rejoiced when she found her coin and called for a community celebration. The shepherd rejoiced when he found sheep and called for a community celebration.

And Jesus rejoices in saving his people. He doesn't regard someone coming to him with indifference. Doesn't regard him with a shrug of the shoulders. Doesn't say, well I was hoping for someone a little better, a little more orthodox, a little theologically switched on.

Not at all. We're told in Zephaniah he rejoices over them with singing. The gospel tells us, friends, that we are infinitely loved, infinitely valued, infinitely treasured by God.

Maybe tonight you're not a Christian. And you know you're lost. And God is inviting you through his word to come to him. That is a gospel offer.

[23 : 56] That is a gospel invitation. Don't be put off by what you may have done in the past. Don't be put off by what you may be doing in the present. Don't be afraid by what you may be about to do in the future.

Don't be put off by what people may have said to you. Don't be put off by what people may have said about you. There is a good shepherd this evening and he is calling to you through his word, come to me and I will give you rest.

That is a gospel invitation. Or maybe tonight you are a Christian and yet you feel desperately lost. You feel you've wandered from God.

You feel you've lost your spiritual direction and your spiritual bearings and your spiritual focus. You feel you've forgotten God. You feel you've forgotten your identity as a child of God.

You feel that you've forgotten your calling to show forth the greatness of God. You know you've disappointed God. You know you've disobeyed God. You know you've displeased God. You feel tonight you're under the chastisement of God.

[25 : 02] And there is this good shepherd who approaches you in his word tonight. And he says arise and come with me. Don't sit where you are.

Don't stay in that rut. Don't define yourself by your past mistakes. Arise and come with me.

But you know friends this is more than an evangelistic text. There's a challenge in these verses. You see there can be people who are happy if people come to church so long as they look like them, so long as they dress like them, so long as they speak like them, so long as they earn like them, so long as they behave like them.

But the gospel grace Jesus smashes through all of this to create radically diverse worshipping communities. I'll never forget an article I read on the gospel coalition website a few years ago which said just because your church wants to grow doesn't mean it wants to grow the way God wants it to grow.

Just because your church wants to grow doesn't mean it wants to grow the way God wants it to grow. You remember how the gospel works in such power in the city of Philippi in Acts 16?

[26 : 26] We've got this nice, successful, pious, business woman, Lydia, who responds to the gospel and everyone would be like great, Lydia's become a Christian, Lydia can finance the church, Lydia can support the missionaries, Lydia can reach out to her neighbourhood but then we've got an impoverished, enslaved, exploited little girl who responds to the gospel.

What could she bring to the table? And then we've got a hard working, hard living, hard talking prison guard who responds to the gospel. The gospel friends defies class, defies race, defies gender, defies age, defies status, defies mental abilities, defies stereotypes.

Jesus takes complete strangers, people who have absolutely nothing in common and he turns them into the family of God. That's what the gospel does.

Do you look at those around you tonight and you think to yourself I've got nothing in common with that person but I have this, I have Jesus and they have Jesus. I often think that when I look at the high free on a Sunday and I think what do I have in common with these people?

Here I am, guy brought up in Easter Ross, doesn't have a word of Gaelic and I'm ministering to these people, most of whom were born and bred in Stornoway and the surrounding area, many of whom speak Gaelic.

[27 : 53] What do I have in common with them? We have Jesus. Jesus and that is the greatest thing anyone can have in common. Today friends, we have been encouraged to reach out to anyone and everyone with the gospel and we have been called to welcome them wholeheartedly into our church family.

There is rejoicing in heaven over the bank manager and the doctor and the teacher and the construction worker and the offshore businessman and the housewife and the unemployed person who turn to the seeking saviour.

And there is rejoicing in heaven over the old person and the young person and the single person and the married person and the divorced person and the widowed person and the drug dealer and the chronic alcoholic who turn to the seeking saviour.

Heaven rejoices equally over every person who comes to Jesus. And today Jesus is calling us through his word and he's calling us to do all that we can to be a diverse gospel-centered, gospel-driven, gospel-speaking, gospel-believing, gospel-loving community of grace.

A church that has the gospel of Jesus, the good news of Jesus at the very center and shows it in the way that they live. A church that declares the love of God, but also a church that displays the love of God that we have known in Jesus.

[29 : 36] Friend, is that your vision for Point Free Church tonight? Is that your vision for Knock Free Church tonight? And is that your vision for the United Point congregations tonight?

That this would be a community that declares the love of God in Christ, but doesn't simply declare it, but displays it in the way it deals with those who come into it.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.