

September 14, 2025

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Heaven Rejoices”

Luke 15:1-10

*“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”*

They were not wrong. Jesus did indeed hang out with prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners. Some folks today twist this truth about Jesus’ ministry in a way that allows them to be comfortable in their sins. The thinking goes “Jesus always hung out with the sinners, not the pious holy rollers, so I’m cool being a sinner who loves Jesus.” One young man stands out particularly in my memory. He was in his late 30s dying of cancer and somewhat voiced a belief in Christ, yet professed to be completely content in his sinful lifestyle because Jesus was good hanging out with sinners. He reminded me of that Billy Joel lyric, “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners have much more fun...”

I think we’d all shake our heads at such a ridiculous way of looking at things. But truth be told, as sinners we are all at risk of sliding into this kind of thinking. It’s easy to do because, as is the case with all good lies, there is a lot of truth mixed in here. Christ came to save sinners. These parables about the shepherd and the lost sheep, the woman and the lost coin: they express heaven’s joy at what Christ’s death and resurrection accomplishes—the salvation of the repentant sinner. Jesus comes and receives sinners and eats with them because He has come to gather sinners into His kingdom through the forgiveness of their sins.

Yet the lie that springs out of this is that because Jesus came for sinners and emptied sin of its power, those sins are no longer all that, well, sinful or damning. But listen closely to what Jesus says: *“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance...Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

Over what is the divine joy in these parables? Repentance; the repentance of the sinner. The joy is not focused at Jesus. It is true and right that the angels render all praise and worship to Christ and His divine glory. But in this parable the focus is without a doubt on the sinner’s repentance.

And repentance makes no accommodation for sin. Repentance is turning one’s back on sin and toward the living Christ. Repentance sees sin for what it is; vile, damning and an affront to God and repentance flees from sin. Not that we can repent to the point of living lives free from the commission of sins—our fallen nature still clings to us and we stumble continually. But repentance hates the sin and continually turns back to Christ, hopefully managing to get better at resisting sin in the process.

I do have to give that guy dying of cancer credit for being honest and up front about his unrepentance. I think practicing Christians often manage to fool ourselves in this realm. One may work hard for a living and generate wealth, even give the full tithe to the church, yet they are greedy, loving mammon, failing to share generously with the needy. This sin is then justified by one’s hard work; deserving to keep it all for one’s own pleasure. Thus, no repentance.

Pride, self-righteousness, entitlement to certain standing and regard in the community that justifies not having to regard the lowly—this stuff can creep into a Christian’s thinking and life pretty easily. I mean, we tend to be upright and honest citizens, right? Problem is that we like thinking of ourselves as upright and honest citizens and there are plenty of others around who, well, just aren’t so much. So, no repentance.

Sexual sin—so many Christians have so swallowed the mores of our hyper-sexualized culture that the moral green light is given to any type of behavior. Slap the word “love” on a relationship and that makes it all okay, regardless of God’s design of one man, one woman, in marriage until death parts them. Even the rightly married justify corruption of the mind in their choice of TV, movies and other media, not to mention the garbage on the internet. It is excused as entertainment, or maybe because “God created me this way.” Thus again, no repentance.

These are just a few examples. Christians can do this in so many ways with covetousness, impatience, anger, jealousy, addiction, physical or verbal abuse of others—the list goes on and on. We find a reason to explain a sinful thought, word or deed away as acceptable and warranted, thus we still think we’re a “good Christian” and that’s just a part of life, nothing to repent of, to put away and go in a different direction. What we’ve really done is the idiotic; we are being cool with being a sinner who loves Jesus.

For church folk this may be us being just like the Pharisees and scribes, standing apart as the righteous ones calling others the real sinners, hypocritically standing in our self-justified offenses, and that’s pretty awful.

But what is even worse is to consider what’s not happening in heaven because of our refusal to root out and repent of that sin. Now bear in mind that I’m just logically extrapolating from the text here and don’t have a divine insight into the spiritual realms. But imagine you’re an angel looking down on a baptized child of God who professes faith in Christ yet is clinging to a sinful behavior and refusing to repent of it. No joy. No rejoicing. Likely disappointment, mourning and sadness even.

Now consider the outcome in heaven when you honestly look at your life in light of God’s Word—both the Holy Law and the good news teachings of the Gospel. One searches out the unloving, selfish thoughts and behaviors one is keeping from Christ and brings them into the light before Him. They are ugly, damning, offensive to God. And they are forgiven!

Hallelujahs sound from heaven; joy and rejoicing! It’s the father at the return of the prodigal! It’s the joy of the dead returning to life! It the gushing love of a merciful Creator at the return of His beloved child who was lost! *“There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

Let that image sink in.

We so often look at repentance in a dark light. According to our corrupted nature it’s a loss; a loss of the worldly and fallen things to which our flesh is inclined to cling. According to our spiritual nature it is a shameful thing; we’re bringing the repugnant sewer of our sins before the face of a holy, pure and righteous God. But that’s our perspective from below.

Try seeing your repentance according to St. Paul’s exhortation in Colossians: *“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”* Jesus tells us what’s going on above when we repent—He has died and risen to make this the reality in heaven. There is no wrath of the Father; Jesus has taken it away. There is no rejection; Jesus was forsaken in our place. There is no darkness, only the light of Christ’s forgiveness and joy that we stand before the Father wrapped in His perfect righteousness. It’s wonderful! It’s reason for alleluias!

So repent, repent, repent. Root out the sin to which you may cling in your life, trying to justify it, to somehow impossibly make it cool with God. It’s not. And being rid of it is not loss, it is the gaining of God’s joyous favor and entrance into the eternal kingdom of Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us each intently, eagerly and continually seek to recognize our sin for what it is and, despising the shame of it, bring it before Christ who puts it to death. And, striving to then put it do death in our life here also, know that in doing so there is rejoicing in heaven over you, one sinner, one child of God, who repents.

Amen.