

What makes a Pharisee a Pharisee? We've talked about the Pharisees before, but it's worth talking about them at least a little bit so that we understand what Jesus is doing in our parables for today. The Pharisees are those, of course, who are deadly serious about keeping God's Law. In fact, they're so serious about keeping God's Law that they believe that there's another group of laws that Moses never wrote down that he handed down from mouth to mouth, and they keep those laws too. So they're so serious about God and so serious about keeping the Law that they go above and beyond what everyone else is doing. That's why we meet the Pharisees, for example, in the Scriptures saying and doing many things, like tithing mint and dill and cumin. Or the Pharisee who was boasting in the Gospels that "I fast twice a week and I give a tithe of everything that I get," which of course was above and beyond what the Law required. And you meet the Pharisees also doing things like washing with a fist, which meant that they would ritually wash whether they needed it or not every time they ate. And they were so serious about this washing that Mark tells us that they washed their cups and their plates and even their chairs in the same way. These are men who are deadly, deadly serious about doing what God wants them to do.

Or at least so they thought. Because unfortunately along with that came a very partisan spirit. They were party men. They didn't actually care about other people. They only cared about themselves. This is why Jesus blasts them on many occasions, saying that "Yes, you tithe your mint and your dill and your cumin, but you forget the more important things, like mercy and love and righteousness." And even the Pharisee who boasted of fasting twice in a week could look down on the tax collector near him and thank God that he was nothing like that man. Or the Pharisees who crossed earth and sea to make disciples of that party. Not that they were introducing them to God. They were just making more Pharisees. And so that's the kind of spirit that they had. Because they were seeking after God, they were set apart from everybody else. In fact, that's what the word Pharisee means, one who is set apart, one who is different.

So you can only imagine, then, how distressed they must have felt to see Jesus acting in the way that he is. How could Jesus be dealing with these tax collectors? How could Jesus be eating with these sinners? The tax collectors, after all, were those Jews who were traitors. They had turned their back on their own country, working for the Romans, the hated Romans, collecting taxes for them. And on top of that, they were thieves. Think of wee little Zaccheus, for example, and the story of Zaccheus. After he comes to believe in Jesus, the first thing that he says is, "I'm going to give back four times as much as I stole," because that's the kind of men that they were. And the sinners besides! People who didn't even try to keep the Law! Prostitutes. The Law said that they should stone such women. What is Jesus doing hanging out with these people? And on they grumbled and grumbled and grumbled. Jesus wasn't acting like a Pharisee, and that made them upset.

Jesus tells these parables, then, in response to this attitude. I know so often we think of the lost being found when we hear these parables, and that's true. That's an important thing to take away from this. But the reason why Jesus tells us these parables is exactly against this kind of loveless, joyless attitude. The attitude that doesn't care about the souls of other people. The attitude that only is looking at itself. Because it's looking inward and thinking that it's serving God by looking inward, it forgets that God Himself rejoices when every sinner comes to Him.

So let's look at these parables then. Jesus begins with a very colorful picture. And you can just imagine a shepherd standing outside of his sheep pen and probably early in the morning as he's just getting ready to take his sheep out to pasture. And he starts counting the sheep as they're coming out. One, two, three, so on and so forth, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine. Wait a minute. We're one short. Well, maybe I miscounted. So let's try this again. Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine.

Nope, we're missing one. One of them is gone. Now, the thing about sheep, on the other hand, is that he probably knew right away which one was missing. Because cattle, on the one hand, they kind of take turns getting out. It's not a habitual thing. But sheep, on the other hand, it's usually the same one that gets out again and again and again. And so he would have known right away, "OK, well, that one's gone again."

So what would you do in that situation? Would you say, "Well, I've got ninety-nine! I guess I'm just missing one," and just move on with your life? That's not what he does. He could have said, "Well, I'll take one of the other shepherds, one of my fellow workers. I'll send him out. One of the young boys, he can go find that sheep." That's not what he does either. Instead, the shepherd himself goes, leaving behind the ninety-nine in the wilderness to go out and to look for the missing sheep. Now, you have to understand something here. There's danger involved in looking for this sheep, because the wilderness is the place of wild animals. The wilderness is the place of thieves and robbers. And it's not like he has a fence he can go along looking for this sheep. There are no fences. This would take him all day or longer to find this sheep. But despite the risk, the danger, and the toil on himself, this shepherd still goes. And he looks and he looks until he finds the missing sheep.

Now, how would you react when you found that sheep? Would you say, "I guess your time is up, buddy. You're going to the ring now! We don't deal with fence crawlers"? That's not what this shepherd does. He puts him on his shoulders, this hundred or two-hundred pound animal, and carries him all the way back on himself and calls out to his friends and his neighbors, "Rejoice with me, for I have the sheep that I lost!" Just so, Jesus says, there is joy in heaven over every single sinner who repents. Heaven itself rejoices when someone comes to faith.

And the second parable is just like it. Jesus tells us of a woman who has ten silver coins. That's a lot of money for those days. And she would've worn these coins in a band around her head, because that's just what they did. And she would've been counting, seven, eight, nine. There's one missing! What do you do? Do you just say, "Well, it'll turn up"? Do you just say, "Well, I guess I'm just down one more coin"? No. She takes her broom, and she takes the lamp, and she lights it in her house, and she begins to sweep her dirt floor carefully, looking for that coin. And when she finally finds it, she lifts it up and holds it up and goes out and cries out, "Rejoice with me! For I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, Jesus says, there is joy before the angels in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Do you understand how big of a deal that is, Christians? How big a deal it is that the angels rejoice over every sinner who comes back to God? The Bible tells us that there are two times that the angels have rejoiced. And the first time was when God created the world, that wonderful, beautiful act of God in creating all things. The morning stars sang together, Job says, for joy when God laid the foundation of the world. And the angels also sing and rejoice over every single sinner who returns to God. It's that important to him. He does not desire that the wicked die in his evil. He desires that the wicked man turn from his evil way and live. The Pharisees didn't understand that. They were so caught up in themselves and their own little party spirit that they couldn't rejoice even God Himself was rejoicing over those who repented.

But I ask you, Christians. Do we not sometimes act like the Pharisees? Do we rejoice when someone comes to believe in God, when someone turns away from their sins and turns back towards God? It makes heaven itself jubilant! Do we feel the same joy? Or do we sometimes get caught up in our own little ways of looking at things? When we look around at the pews around us and how they are empty, and we remember the days when there used to be a lot more people here, is it only then that we say we should start doing evangelism, because we should fill this church up again so it's just the way that I

remember it being? Rather than rejoicing over those who come to faith, no matter how many that might actually be? Do we see the troubles going on in this nation and start to say things like, "We should go back to believing in God. We should all go back to church, because that will solve all of these problems, if we all just kind of became Christians again"? And so we start doing evangelism because of fear or evangelism because of sadness. Or do we sometimes get caught up in our own little ways of looking at things, and then we go out into the world and meet other Christians who have some mistaken ideas about the Bible--yes, I'm not denying that at all. But do we look down on them for it, thinking that, "Well, because they're not one of us, they're just not Christians"? I'm not excusing their errors, and I'm not saying that we shouldn't try to lead them out of error, but do we rejoice at finding faith or do we just look for our own little ways of thinking?

Christians, God rejoices over you. God rejoiced the day you came to faith. The angels themselves sang out for joy when you came to believe in Jesus. That day that He brought you to Himself was a day unlike any other for Him, because He delights in all who come to faith. And He calls to you today to rejoice with Him over every sinner who repents, because God is calling all to Himself and wants all to be saved. And so he calls each and every one of us to turn away from our sins and to live.

Let us rejoice with Him, Christians. Rejoice over every single sinner who repents. Rejoice when someone becomes a part of this congregation. Rejoice when someone professes in Jesus. Rejoice when someone turns away from death towards life, because the angels rejoice and God rejoices too. Jesus calls to us, Jesus who has given us faith, Jesus who has forgiven us, Jesus calls to us today: "Rejoice with me! For I have found the sheep that I had lost."

To the God who seeks and the God who finds be all glory, honor, and worship, now and forever.
Amen.