

The Pharisees and scribes nail it. They state the beautiful truth of the Gospel, despite the fact that they grumble it with angry hearts. *“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”* What is despicable to them is glorious to others. The tax collectors and sinners are the ones Jesus is receiving. They are drawing near to Jesus to hear His words. It is life-changing for them. Once they were living in darkness; now they dwell in light. Once they were captives to their sin; now they are delivered from sin’s bondage. Once they were lost; now they are found. This is reason to rejoice, not to grumble. Jesus even says so. The angels in heaven rejoice when even one sinner is found, rescued like a lost sheep, by Jesus.

Who would not rejoice at this? The devil. He rejoices, not when sinners are found, but when they are lost. The devil rejoices when sinners live in darkness and are bound by their sin. His only goal, his only course of action, and he is very good at it, is to lure the sheep away from the Shepherd so they become lost. He does not target those who are already his. He targets the baptized; those within the sheepfold who belong to the Shepherd. He oppresses them, he afflicts them, he tempts them, he strives to separate even one sheep away from the Shepherd. And when he is successful in this, he rejoices.

He was surely doing much rejoicing when the tax collectors and sinners were bound by their sin. He had them right where he wanted them. They were trapped in sinful lifestyles. And these kept them from the gathering of God’s people. These tax collectors and sinners were not welcome in the churches, the synagogues. They were not welcome to hear the Word of God.

But these are the ones Jesus welcomes. These outcasts and wretched sinners are the very ones He receives. And we can hear the devil’s anger expressed by the lips of the Pharisees and scribes: *“This man receives sinners and eats with them!”* The devil had been rejoicing over the tax collectors and sinners, but now it is the angels in heaven who rejoice over them.

Who, at the present time, is rejoicing over you? Someone is. It’s either the angels in heaven, and if it’s not them, it’s the devil. Does he have you right where he wants you? Is he enjoying his successes in binding you to a sinful way of life apart from your Shepherd?

I hope not. I pray not. Is your presence here this morning evidence that it is the angels, and not the devil, who are rejoicing over you? I cannot see in your heart, nor can you see in mine. You confess the truth of the Gospel here. But then, so did the Pharisees and scribes. They just didn’t believe it in their hearts. Even though they were often in Jesus’ presence, they did not believe that Jesus welcomed and received them. Why should He? They were not the sinners that the tax collectors and others were.

I hope you are. I hope you can say with the Apostle Paul, “I am the chief of sinners!” I hope and pray that you are not part of the ninety-nine who need no repentance. Because then, you are not here to be found, to be delivered from your sin.

We need to be careful with the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, in how we interpret it. "I once was lost, but now am found" is not referring to our conversion to the Christian Faith. Not according to the Scriptures. Jesus' sheep are always losing their way. His sheep always need to be found and rescued. And this, there is not a day in your life, nor mine, when we do not need to repent.

Jesus knows this. Which is why not a Sunday morning goes by in which He is not here to receive you. However full of stench your life has been, He welcomes you, He receives you, He forgives you, and here at His Table of Grace He dines with you.

And the comforting thing is that Jesus does not just receive sinners. As if it's up to us to first seek Him, and find Him, so that He can welcome us. No! Jesus seeks sinners. He goes in search of His lost sheep to find them.

He sought out the tax collectors and sinners in His day. It's because a lost sheep is just that...lost. And it's going to get stuck in the mud or put its head through a fence and not be able to pull it out. That's what sheep do. That's what we do. And Jesus knows this. He doesn't ever wait for His lost sheep to find their way back to Him. They won't. Nor will you and I when we are lost.

But the best thing about being a lost sheep is that Jesus searches for us until He finds us. For some lost sheep, it takes their entire life. And just before they die, Jesus finds them, like the thief on the cross, and He rejoices with the angels in heaven over them. For some lost sheep, it happens sooner. Jesus finds them and they become amazingly useful to Him in His Kingdom, like the Apostle Paul who was found by Jesus.

You have a wonderful Shepherd in Jesus. He died on the cross for you. He rose from the dead for you. He baptized you into His death and resurrection. And He knows how easily you become lost and bound in your sin. And so, Jesus is always seeking you. He seeks you until He finds you, and He forgives your sin. And then, with His friends and neighbors, the saints and angels in heaven, He rejoices over you. And not just once, but every time He finds you, His beloved little sheep. Amen.