

“The People Around Jesus”
The Prodigal God, Part 1

Luke 15:1-10
February 21, 2010

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable.” Luke 15:1-3

Today we begin our Lenten Series, “The Prodigal God”. We’re going to learn about the one aspect of the kingdom of God that you and I have the hardest time understanding. It’s what got Jesus into the most trouble with the religious leaders. It has to do with the kind of crowd that Jesus befriended. The dinner table on the screen is a clue to the one thing Jesus did with those friends that offended a lot of religious folks. He not only



welcomed sinner, he even ate meals with them.

If you were to ask any rabbi in Jesus’ day they would say that one sign or symbol for the kingdom of God was a banquet, a great feast. Look at this passage from the prophet Isaiah and let’s read it together,

“In Jerusalem, the Lord of hosts will spread a wonderful feast for all the people of the world. It will be a delicious banquet with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat.” (Is. 25:6)

Isaiah proclaimed that when God’s long

promised Messiah would arrive on the scene it would be like a feast, a party, a banquet, the ultimate experience of God’s abundance and generosity.

Now, I’ve got some questions for you to answer. Who does God want to sit at his table? Look at the verse from Isaiah. How big is God’s table? How many places are at God’s table? Who does God want to be there? How inclusive is God’s kingdom? Right! God wants all the people of the world at his banquet table.

So why is it that Jesus kept getting in trouble by associating with and even eating meals with tax collectors and sinners? Here’s why. Jesus claims to be a righteous man. He’s studied the prophets. He knows the law of Moses, and he claims to obey it. But the religious leaders, the Pharisees and the Scribes see him hanging out with all the wrong people, even eating with them. In those days they had a Hebrew phrase for the kind of folks that Jesus was hanging with. Am-ha’aretz. Literally, it means “people of the land.” Most of them lived in rural areas where they received little or no religious education. These were folks who did not know the law of Moses. The scribes and pharisees viewed them as ignorant, backwards, unrefined and embarrassing. In contemporary terms, think of words like “tacky” or “riffraff.” If you lived

in the south you might call them “common.” These were the people whose idea of fine art was a picture of Elvis painted on black velvet. Their two major food groups were beef jerky and Eskimo pies.

The Scribes and Pharisees had a list of who counts with God and who doesn't. The Am-ha'aretz were not on the list. You can hear the contempt in their voices. The Am-ha'aretz didn't observe the law. They weren't pure. If you were serious about being right with God, you did not associate with these people. Above all else you did not eat with them.

Even in our day, who eats with whom is something of a social statement. It symbolizes who's in and who's out. In high school cafeterias, at least in ancient times when I was seventeen, there was often a table where the elite jocks and cheerleaders would eat together. Does the term “nerd” mean anything to you? How about “dweeb”? Imagine, one day, a little nerd or dweeb comes and sits at the jock table. Students start looking at each other. Doesn't he understand? Dweebs and jocks don't eat together. They don't mix. It would be intensely embarrassing. It's not done.

Adults! Don't be smug. This same dynamic happens among grownups. Think about it. Which people would you not welcome at your table when you eat chicken at the Rod & Gun Club? Or the soup supper tables at church? In Jesus' day, multiply this dynamic a hundred times. To eat with somebody was to make a statement that they are part of your community. The Pharisees had a strict order, and the order was first somebody had to repent, and then they had to purify themselves and become holy and then

the Pharisees could have fellowship with them. Jesus comes along and he messes up the whole order. He has fellowship with the rejects first. He invites the riff-raff, the nerds, the dweebs to sit at his table. He invites them to his table not in ignorance, but on purpose, not once in a while, but day after day.

Every time Jesus sat down at a table it was a real life parable. Every time he ate with the riffraff, it was a form of protest. He was being deliberately provocative. He was saying to all the people of Israel—but especially to the Scribes and Pharisees—“These are my kind of people.” Jesus is claiming authority to announce, “The kingdom of God has now arrived. It's now available.” The feast has started, and Jesus is in charge of the guest list. He's saying there's room at God's table for anybody who wants to come, just the way they are.

John Ortberg tells the story about Jim and Pam. One day Ortberg was visiting his home town and he went to get his hair cut at a shop owned by Jim and Pam. Jim started asking him questions. The conversation turned toward spiritual things. They had a long conversation. When he got home John Ortberg told his mother. He said, “You know, Mom, you ought to have a talk with Jim and Pam, because I think they're really interested in God.” His mom responded, “There is no way. I've known those two for quite awhile. He's on his third marriage. She's on her fifth. I know about their lifestyle. They're not interested in God.” John said, “I think you're wrong. I think you should talk to them.”

The next time she went in to get her hair done, John's mother didn't want to talk. Pam came to do her hair. She sat down in her chair and she prayed, “God, do you really

want me to talk to Pam? Because I don't want to. If you really want me to talk to her, you're going to have to make her say something to me first."

Pam walked over to Ortberg's mother and said, "Kathy, I hear you and John have a Bible study. Jim and I would like to come." Ortberg's mother took that as a "yes." Pam started walking through their history. She was raised by parents, both of whom abused alcohol. One of them was Jewish, the other was Catholic. The Jewish parent would take her to a synagogue and when she got home, the other parent would make her pray the rosary and ask God's forgiveness for going to a synagogue. Those were her first experiences of God. By the time she was sixteen years old, Pam said she could drink any man she knew under a table. She had already been married and divorced by the time she was 21 and had a pattern of abusive relationships. When she finally came to grips with her addiction, she got involved in a 12-step group. But because of her childhood history, she couldn't bring herself to believe in God or having to turn her life over to a higher power. Instead she decided, to call her higher power "Ralph." She said, "I'll turn my life and my will over to Ralph."

For a while that worked. But then her life started falling apart again—not the addiction but other areas of her life. She was in an AA meeting one time, and as they do when everyone's going to share, they begin by saying, "My name is Pam. I'm an alcoholic" or whatever their name is. On this day a guy came in off the streets. He had never been there before. He was drunk as a skunk, smelled horrible, had been vomiting. When it was his turn he said, "I'm an alcoholic. My name is Ralph." Pam said, somehow, at that

moment something inside her snapped. Something inside her wanted for there to be a God she could love. She wanted to hear from that God, and she wanted to know that God. She and her husband ended up going to the Bible study which John Ortberg's parents' led in their home. They started coming to the church they were involved.

I want to ask you at this point in this talk, "Who's on your list? Who are you tempted to give up on? Who are the people you don't eat with?" Maybe it's people who lead a lifestyle that you find offensive. You might be willing to have them to the table if they cleaned up their act first, but not until then. The truth is, when you think about people in that category, you just don't like them very much.

Maybe it's people that you think are not very bright or high-functioning or attractive. You don't think of yourself as snobbish, you just find that you're not very likely to sit at table with these folks. Maybe it's people from some different ethnic group or cultural group. You don't think of yourself as prejudiced. Most of us don't think of ourselves that way. You just find that when you stop to think about it, you're not doing anything to make sure they get invited to God's table.

Jesus is here today to tell you about a lost sheep and a lost coin getting found. But Jesus isn't really concerned about lost sheep and lost coins. He's concerned about lost homosapiens, lost people, people who get lost through their own foolishness, thoughtlessness and their own cussed self-will.

And here is the confounding and amazing truth. Lost sheep don't find themselves. Lost

coins don't find themselves. And neither do lost people find themselves. Jesus comes looking for them. Jesus is the Good Shepherd one who finds lost people, the woman who finds lost coins. So, please don't tell me that you found Jesus. Don't tell me you found God. Jesus was never lost. Neither was God.

Most people think of religion as "humanity's search for God." And you and I would like to think of ourselves as spiritual seekers. The old saying goes, "If you sincerely search for God, you will find him."

Here's the problem. If you believe that you have searched for and found God, then you will naturally disdain those who seem to be making no effort at all. You will look at "sinners" and say, "I found God! If you try, you can too. I did."

But Jesus turns this whole idea on its head. This is the part that's so hard for us to understand. The Good Shepherd must go out to seek and to save the lamb that is lost. Likewise the lost coin cannot search and find its owner. The woman had to search and find the coin.

And here is the first great blow to the world's categories. Every other religion says that you can search for and find God if you try hard enough. Not Christianity. Christianity says, no, it's the other way around. God is the one who had to come down into the world to seek and save you and me. Salvation is a gift of God's love. It is not your achievement.

Jesus did not look at the Am-ha'aretz the way the Pharisees did. That's because the Pharisees did not see themselves as lost sinners saved by grace. No, they scorned "sinners". They felt superior to them. But

Jesus says that heaven rejoices when such people are reached and found. It makes Jesus happy—very happy—when one such person welcomed into his church.

In a strange way that you and I will never fully grasp, Jesus knew that he would have to die on a cross in order to bring the lost home. But the writer of Hebrews told it this way.

"For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame"
Hebrews 12:2

The joy Jesus had in doing his Father's will, and the joy he had in finding you and me, was so great that he was willing to endure the cross.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, when we claim to be your followers, we're not shouting that we have found you but that you have found us. We were lost without you, but now we're found. So, we won't speak with pride of being Church-goers or Bible readers, or passionate prayers. But we will confess that we stumble, we stumble often, and we need you to clean up our messes. We won't claim to be strong, but confess we are weak. We need your strength. No, we're not perfect, not even close. Our many flaws are far too visible. But, you Lord, have shown us on the cross that even disobedient children are worth it. You still place a high value on us and you invite us to fellowship with you at your banquet table.

Today we pray for all those who put a low value on themselves. We pray for those caught up in self-destructive lifestyles, for all those who have heartaches or sickness or who live in hurtful relationships. For them, we'll call upon your name and seek your mercies.

We also pray for all of us who are proud and self-satisfied, who feel superior to others when we know they are not your followers. Forgive us for gaining our self-worth from avoiding those we think are beneath us. Teach us, like you, to reach out to all people, no matter their reputation, their life-style, their ethnicity or their beliefs.

Sustain in hope those facing illness or injury, whether it be minor or life threatening. Grant hope all who call upon you. Give them the peace that passes all understanding for it is in your name, O Jesus, we pray. Amen