

A Gift To

From

You Are God's Treasure

LUKE 15

Jesus: The Sinner Magnet—Part One

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:1,2)

I was visiting a man in the county jail who was doing time for yet another driving-under-the-influence violation. Alcohol abuse was not his only problem. He was also addicted to cocaine. His marriage had failed several years earlier. His most recent relationship had ended just before he went to jail. He had just found out that his ex-girlfriend was pregnant and that she didn't want to see him anymore. His father had died just a few months earlier. He had lied and stolen from his own parents to feed his drug and alcohol addiction. He was a lousy son, a lousy father, a lousy person in every aspect of his life. “Look at me, Pastor,” he said. “I'm thirty years old, and I'm sitting in jail for at least another six months. I don't have a job; my ten-year-old son will be driving before I get

my license back. I've hurt the most important people in my life, and I've messed up just about every opportunity in my life. What's wrong with me?"

I told him the story of the lost son from Luke 15. When I finished, the man's jaw literally dropped in shock. "That story's in the Bible?" he asked. "Yes," I replied. "Show me," he said. So I opened my Bible to Luke 15 and showed him. He scanned the verses and then said, "This is me! This is my story!"

The key to appreciating this amazing chapter is to do just what that man did—to see ourselves in the stories of Luke 15. Are you willing to admit that you are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and that lost son? Luke 15 is your story too.

At Ford Motor Company, employees are ranked on a scale of 1 (clerks and secretaries) to 27 (CEO). If you are a grade 9, you get a coveted parking space. If you are a 13, you are assured of a window in your office. If you get to grade 16, your office comes with a private bathroom.

It is easy to rank employees and to rank people in general. "That Kay, she's about the nicest person I know." "Man, that Alec is a jerk!" We put people into categories just like Ford does, except that most of the time they fall into one of only two categories—good or bad. If you listen to sports-talk radio, as I do,

you hear this happen again and again. Sports heroes are dubbed as either good guys or bad guys.

I have to admit that when I was talking to the man in prison, a part of me was thinking, “Wow! What a messed-up guy this is!” I felt pretty squeaky clean in my pastor suit and pastor role, with no alcohol or drug problems, a stable marriage, and not even one arrest on my record. I get the same feeling when I pick up the paper and read about people with names like Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. I find it hard to relate to coldblooded killers. I get the same feeling when my kids misbehave. Sometimes I am shocked at their blatant sinning—as if blatant sinning is foreign to me. I get the same feeling when I am with fellow Christians who do something rude or crude. I then feel as if they have just fallen a rung or two below me on the ladder of goodness. It is hard for us to think of ourselves biblically, that is, that “there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22,23). It is so easy for us to think of ourselves as good, or at least better than so many others, ignoring the fact that God demands holiness, not merely basic decency or “more” goodness than all those spiritual slackers out there.

However, to properly understand and appreciate Luke 15, we must accept the fact that there is only

one category into which all of us fall in the eyes of the one who matters most, God. His way is the only way to see ourselves realistically. He sees us as sinners, corrupt in our nature and oriented toward self, not God. Accepting this is the only way to appreciate his cure, the cure that is so beautifully pictured in Luke 15. His cure is his grace, which he gave us through Jesus Christ.

Although there is clearly only one category of people before God—sinners—there are two responses to our sin and to Jesus, our Savior from sin. And they are reflected in our text. On the one side are the tax collectors and sinners. On the other side are the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Now Jesus did not tailor his ministry to one category of people. While we are told that the tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus to hear him, it is not because Jesus intentionally reached out only to those people. The gospels nowhere indicate that. We are told that Jesus went into the towns and villages to preach, that he taught at synagogues and by the seashore, on hills and in fields. We are told that he spoke to all kinds of people—not merely crowds of “bad” people. Yet “bad” people flocked to him because of his message. The people considered “good”—those who may have been morally better

than others—for the most part rejected him because of his message of grace. They thought their way to God was different, and they were especially repulsed by the way Jesus embraced the sinners.

Jesus is sort of like a magnet. A magnet attracts objects with an opposite polarity but repulses objects that have the same polarity. Jesus either attracts people or he repulses them. A Savior who is the ultimate goodness and holiness repulses people who believe they are good and holy. People who believe that they are not and never can be as good as God demands they be are drawn to Jesus when they find in him ultimate goodness—merciful kindness and forgiving grace.

We see that in the first verse of Luke 15, “The tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him.” These were people at the bottom rung of society’s ladder. To understand how despised tax collectors were, imagine that the United States was taken over by China and your next-door neighbor voluntarily went to work for the Chinese government. He would collect taxes with the understanding that, as long as the Chinese government got what it wanted, he could charge whatever he wanted and pocket the difference. Each day you would drive past the shiny new SUV in his driveway and be reminded