

Jesus teaches us how to love by teaching us to rejoice. St. Paul tells us that love rejoices in the truth. Jesus tells us that heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents. To rejoice that someone has been called back to the truth is the highest activity of love.

Of course, rejoicing is not the only thing love does. Love also suffers for the truth. It longs for the truth. It is patient and kind, hoping against hope that the truth will always prevail. Love doesn't write someone off who is caught up in sin or going astray. It always hopes for repentance, reconciliation, and peace. This is a humbling experience. It's like a shepherd going out and searching for the lost sheep, walking through thorns, pushing through the sweat and scrapes, determined to find that dumb, wandering sheep. Or it's like a woman who sweeps her house and lights a lamp, looking for that one lost coin, turning over furniture, racking her brain over where it could be, until she finally finds it. The search for that which is lost is not a pleasant search. It's grueling and often discouraging. It might even make you look foolish, chasing leads that lead nowhere, spending time thinking about someone who might seem like a lost cause.

It's hard to call people to repentance. Our sinful flesh would rather write them off or imagine that they will find their way back on their own. This is because the sinful flesh is cynical. It leads people to remain silent and pretend that everything is ok or to forget about those who have gone astray, hoping not to be bothered by them anymore. The sinful flesh doesn't want to deal with the lost, because the sinful flesh is afraid of being disappointed. It's unwilling to be humbled, and searching for lost sheep is humbling. When you strive to call someone back from error and sin and you get ignored or even attacked, this is humbling. It can even seem humiliating. You might feel stupid, like a failing salesman, when you stand at a door knocking never to receive a response.

Of course, the church should act on those who never respond. The church should urge them to return to the truth and warn them about God's judgment. If they persistently ignore the church's calls to repentance, then they should be removed. But even when the church excludes someone from the Christian congregation for persistent impenitence, this is always for the purpose of leading that person to repentance, to return to the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Excluding people from the Christian congregation should never be done in spitefulness or vengeance. Christ has given his church the authority to bind sins for the precise purpose to lead people to repentance so they would take refuge in Christ who welcomes and embraces poor, miserable, sinners.

Calling people to repentance is a tiresome task. This is especially true, since those who wash themselves clean often fall right back into the mire. Folks end up wandering off the narrow way soon after they came back in. Jesus warns about seven evil spirits more vicious than the first overtaking them so that they're worse off than they were before. We should take this warning seriously. But we also shouldn't be cynical. We shouldn't assume that those who return to the truth will just fall back into sin and foolishness. Because if we do this, then we are the ones who have fallen.

This is what happened to the scribes and Pharisees. When they saw the tax collectors and sinners come to Jesus, they were angry. They grumbled among themselves. They had no joy. In fact, the very message that could give them joy was exactly what they were complaining about. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. This is the very

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heart of the gospel. Next to John 3:16 and Romans 1:16-17, this complaint of the Scribes and Pharisees can be called the gospel in a nutshell. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who is without any sin, graciously receives sinners to himself, and he eats with them. He shares what he has with those who don't deserve it. This is the good news. There is no news better than this joyous message. But cynicism strips all joy out of your heart.

Would some of these tax collectors and sinners return to the vomit of their sins? Would some of them fall off the narrow way? Perhaps some of them would. But this isn't the point. Our joy comes from the gospel. It comes from the good shepherd who searches for the lost sheep. As Isaiah writes, "We all like sheep have gone astray, but the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Or as Johann Heermann, the Lutheran hymn writer, puts it, "The Shepherd dies for sheep that love to wonder. The Master pays the debt His servants owe Him. Who would not know Him!"

Who would not know him? Who would not rejoice over this good news? Who would not hope and believe and find every joy in this gospel?

Those who don't love the Lord, that's who. Those who love themselves and are proud of their own achievements –they can't find any joy in the gospel when they see it in action. They look down on the sinner who squandered every gift God gave him. "Why wouldn't he squander it again?" they ask. Didn't Jesus himself say not to cast pearls before swine?

But those who think this way don't listen to what Jesus says. Sure, they might like the idea that they understand Jesus' teaching. They pack away a few sayings that they like while ignoring the heart of his message. Jesus says that he desires mercy rather than sacrifice. He desires to forgive rather than to condemn. He desires salvation rather than condemnation. Of course, he warns against the judgment. But when Jesus tells us not to throw pearls before swine, he is talking about fools who scoff and grumble at God's Word. He is warning against those who are cynical, proud, and self-righteous. Regardless of how morally upright they appear, if they are going to mutter at those seeking refuge in Christ, assuming that they aren't truly sincere, then these grumbling Pharisees might as well wave the pride flag with the recalcitrant perverts who attack everything holy.

The tax collectors and sinners didn't come to Jesus to be affirmed by him in their sin. They came to hear him. They came to listen to him. They came for the truth. And this is exactly what love rejoices in. It rejoices in the truth. The gospel of Christ, the good news that God's innocent Son bore the sin and guilt of all sinners, the precious promise of forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and salvation, is so good, so comforting, so joyous that there is a myriad of rejoicing among the angels when just one sinner receives this precious pearl.

In the meantime, love suffers long, bearing with the weak, seeking peace with patience and longsuffering and humility. Yes, it can seem discouraging on the outside. But despite the pains and aches, love is always rejoicing in the gospel truth.

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So look to Jesus who teaches you to rejoice. He treated the shame of his cross and suffering as a little thing because of the joy that was set before him. For the joy of seeking you out, putting you on his shoulders, and carrying you home, he endured the greatest humiliation. Yet, his joy remained through it all. His joy to forgive you, restore you, and strengthen you remains even today.

And Jesus doesn't write you off, even if you have been cynical. Look at how he responded to those grumbling scribes and Pharisees. He invited them to rejoice with him and with all of heaven. He invites you to rejoice with him. He shares everything he has with you. And even when you are being humbled under his mighty hand, he invites you to cast all your cares upon him. He cares for you, and at the right time he will exalt and establish you just as he promised.

This morning we witness one sinner washed clean. Little Dawson is claimed by God, received by Christ, and given his Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches us to welcome Dawson, to pray for him, and to support him in his Christian life with encouragement from God's Word. In other words, he teaches us to love this brother in Christ. He teaches us to love one another. So we begin by rejoicing that Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. To him be the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.