

Sunday, May 3, 2020

Bible Study **The Character of Christ [pt. 2]: JOY**

The Texts: READ Galatians 5:22-25 and Luke 15:1-32

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, **joy**, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...” (*Galatians 5:22-23*). We must first understand that we cannot produce this character in ourselves. It is the Holy Spirit dwelling within us who produces his fruit in our lives. Our return to Galatians 5:22-25 this week will focus our attention on “Joy”. We will take a look at three parables which teach us that “Joy” is not only a characteristic of the Fruit of the Spirit, or an aspect of the Character of Christ, but is part of God’s very nature.

That these three parables of joy are known by their negatives says more about how the church has used them than the point that Jesus is making through them. After all, the first two parables do not end with a lost sheep and a lost coin. The third parable is more about a loving father than either of his sons. And all three end with rejoicing, celebrating, and a party. Makes me wonder why we have come to know these stories by that which was lost, rather than that which was found and rejoiced over.

In the setting that is the backdrop for the telling of these parables, Jesus is teaching people about the kingdom of God, righteousness, and what it means to be a disciple. But these people are identified as “tax collectors and sinners” and “Pharisees and scribes (teachers of the law).” Tax collectors were among the most reviled in Israel for two reasons: they voluntarily partnered with the oppressive Roman government to collect taxes, and in the process fleece their very countrymen for their own gain. The sinners were those deemed by the religious authorities to be beyond the pale and only worthy of God’s wrath. The Pharisees and scribes were the religious authorities that taught scripture and often led in worship at the temple.

The “tax collectors and sinners” are listening (v. 1). The Pharisees and scribes are “muttering” (v. 2). So, Jesus tells three parables that teach about the joy God has in finding and restoring people who have lost their way.

The sheep, it seems, went lost through folly or thoughtlessness. The coin wasn’t lost at all. It had been misplaced. Its circumstances contributed to its lostness. The son, however, deliberately turned his back on the father and chose to live a life away from his father’s care. Yet in each case the point isn’t really the lostness of

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that which went lost. The point in each of these parables is that God receives great joy when His seeking, determined, compassionate love finds and restores that which was lost. There is so much joy, that all of heaven celebrates!

To hammer things home in the final parable, Jesus obviously compares the Pharisees and their muttering, to the complaining and harshness of the elder son. And yet the father responds to this son with compassion, and pleads with this son to also come in to the party. This elder son, like the Pharisees confronting Jesus, have missed the point. The elder son exposes in his complaint (v. 29) that he has served his father out of dread duty, rather than love. The father then explains to the elder son that everything he has was already his (v. 31). He could have celebrated with his friends any time he wanted.

The elder son remained at home, “in service,” “slaving” for the father and missed out on the father’s joy. Why? We have little trouble thinking of God as a God of love, or even a God of judgment and wrath, but a God of joy? Try that on for a minute and ask yourself: “Could it be that I have a sense of humor because my father in heaven is joy, just as much as he is love, and peace, and holiness...? Could it be that I will more fully experience the joy of the father when I engage in the work of the father.....seeking till found those that have got lost?”

G. K. Chesterton once wrote about joy like this while considering the seemingly monotonous way that the sun rises each and every morning. He wrote:

“[The sun’s] routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is almost dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.” (*Orthodoxy*, pp. 65-66, Ignatius, 1965)

May you live into the celebratory joy of our Lord this week.

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Character of Christ [pt. 2]: Joy Questions for Further Reflection

Luke 15:1-10 — The Parable of the Lost (and Found) Sheep

Who is in Jesus' audience as he tells this parable (vv. 1-2)? What are "the tax collectors and 'sinners'" doing as Jesus is teaching (v. 1)? What are "the Pharisees and teachers of the law" doing as Jesus is teaching (v. 2)? Based on what each of these groups is doing, which group do you think is more likely to hear what Jesus is saying? Which group would you have been in if you had been there? In what way does Jesus' parable relate to the muttering of the Pharisees and teachers?

Luke 15:8-10 — The Parable of the Lost (and Found) Coin

Have you ever frantically searched for a lost keepsake or valuable? What did it feel like when you finally recovered that precious item? Is that how you picture this woman searching for her lost coin (vv. 8-9)? Is this how you picture God searching for those who are lost? Have you ever strayed from the Christian faith? If so, how did God "find you" and bring you back? What do these parables teach us about our value to God? What do these parables teach us about the value God gives to others who still need to be found? In what ways can we as His church realize the truth and joy of these parables?

Luke 15:11-32 — The Parable of the Loving Father

Who is the focus of this parable, "the father", "the younger son", or "the elder son"? How much does he lose while in the far country? What brings him to his senses? In what manner does he return to the father? How does the father receive him? Why? How does the elder son feel about his brother's return? Why? How does the father answer the objections of the elder son? What does this parable teach about sin, repentance, the nature of being lost, God's love, and grace? Why does Jesus leave the parable open-ended? How do you think (or hope) the elder son will respond to the pleas (vv. 28, 31-32) of the father? What is the point Jesus is making (v. 32)? Have you ever been "the younger son"? What brought you to your senses? Are there times when you are "the older brother"? What might be "the father's" pleas to you? What has God given you that you have not taken and enjoyed (v. 31)? How many "lost sons" are in this parable (v. 11)? How are "the elder son" and "the younger son" different? How are they alike? Is it possible to "stay home" and nevertheless be just as lost as those who trek to "the far country" (vv. 2 & 28)? What qualities of "the father" do you need most right now? Which of "the father's" qualities would like to more fully exhibit? Is God calling you to be "the father" to a "lost son" in your life?