

We spent the last ten days walking the streets of Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus. We also went to Berea, Philippi, Patmos, Crete, Santorini, and Mykonos. We cruised through the vibrant blue waters of the Aegean. We stood on the very spot where Paul made a case for Christ before Gallio. It was a life-changing trip.

If you want to see some pictures, you should absolutely come to my Bible class over the next several weeks. This won't be a slideshow exactly. We have all been caught in someone else's unending vacation photos. And admittedly, I do have hundreds of photos.

But this is chance for us to make some concrete connections with history, archaeology, and the Bible. We will look at several of these cities as they arise in the Scriptures—especially in Paul's missionary journeys in Acts—and from his Epistles. I think it could be helpful for you. And next time, you should come with me.

After touring the ruins of ancient Ephesus—on the coast of modern Turkey—we stopped at a handmade rug shop. And after the demonstration about how these rugs are made—and why they are so valuable—the salesman tried very hard to sell us rugs that cost more than I will make this year. They were pretty amazing.

The salesman was young. He speaks seven languages. His English is flawless. But he told us that his mother is Christian. And his father is Muslim. And he is not sure what he believes. We had an interesting conversation about faith—and the faith—rather than about the rugs—that we were not going to buy.

His critique of both religions included the fact that people often call themselves something—Muslim or Christian or whatever—but few actually practice.

He mentioned that all the men in the shop were Muslim, but only one actually prayed five times a day. And the Christianity that he sees is basically the same—very few are actually devoted to Christ. They live as if they mattered the most—and Christ didn't matter at all.

And his comments made me think about our Gospel reading today. The topic is repentance. And it is about more than just feeling sorry for the wrong we do. It is a mindset—a theology. It is turning from one thing to another. It is life before God. And it is something we need if we are going to take on the name of Christ.

Here, Jesus explains a parable. Actually, there are two parables in our reading. They are related accounts. And they precede *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. And He says, “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Parables. They are dangerous little stories. They are dark sayings—full of meaning. And they come with an edge. At least as Jesus tells them. They aren't the quaint little moralistic narratives that we make them out to be.

The first parable is *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*. Jesus is, of course, the Shepherd. Sinners are the lost sheep. And then there are these mysterious ninety-nine. They are the righteous. Those who need no repentance—or at least so they think.

I hope you can sense the tension in these words. From the beginning the message of John the Baptist was “Repent and believe the Gospel.” Jesus preaches the same thing. He calls the whole world away from sin to repentance and faith. But in this parable, there are ninety-nine who need no repentance. And it should cause us to ask who they are. And why do they bring no joy to heaven?

Our reading from Luke’s Gospel begins a rather lengthy section of Jesus’ sermons. Almost all of the words for the next three and a half chapters are red. If you have one of those Bibles.

This chapter, chapter 15, is often called the *Lost and Found* chapter and that title is shaped by the parables we hear. And these parables do beautifully illustrate the Gospel. Jesus seeks and saves the lost.

And the lost include those who have wandered away into sin—or self-righteousness—and even those who practice a religious life that is merely cultural—a folk religion that lacks true repentance. He drags us back from the dangerous places we so regularly wander.

But as with many of the parables, Jesus very pointedly tells these stories to confront the Pharisees. And Luke presents the Pharisees and their problem in the first few verses of our reading.

Luke begins this chapter saying, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”

Grumbling. If you find yourselves grumbling as you leave the Church on Sunday, something is amiss. You are doing it wrong. Grumbling means we acutely see the faults of others. It means we have ceased to see our own. This is just not a Gospel word. Especially when the grumbling is about Jesus.

In our reading, the Pharisees don’t see themselves as sinners. And this is foundational to Jesus’ confrontation. From their perspective, they are the good guys. They know what’s best. They don’t need much of anything. Not even from Jesus.

They are content with their own righteousness. They are vastly superior to others—all those “tax collectors and sinners.” And that is good enough.

Now the Pharisees do get one thing right. They fully admit that humans have a deep need to be righteous. It is built into the Mosaic Law. It is built into the very foundation of creation. And it finds its way into the human race in the image of God that is placed upon us.

Righteousness just means that we are going to do things well, right, just, fair, straight. And we are going to live without hypocrisy and guilt and dishonesty. We have a deep need to be this kind of righteous. It is the only right way to live.

But let’s be a little more honest. Even when we try—and often we don’t even try—we still fail. So as sinners, as those who are not righteous, we must find that righteousness somewhere. It is the only thing God will accept on judgment day.

And this passage reveals that there two ways to meet that deep creational need for righteousness. We can be righteous by imputation. Or we can be righteous by comparison. These are the only options. And let me explain what I mean.

First, by imputation. Now this is not a word you are probably going to hear around the lunch table today—unless you bring it up. But it is just so important, that we must grasp it. So stay with me. It is actually a very direct kind of concept.

Righteousness by imputation means that righteousness can come to us as a gift. A gift from Jesus. Because of His perfect life—the cross—and the resurrection—Jesus is able to credit His perfection to our account. It is His righteousness accounted to us.

This theological concept goes all the way back to Abram in Genesis 15, where we hear that “he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

It is like someone else makes this huge financial deposit into our bank accounts. And wouldn't that be nice. I could have bought that rug. But this is not about money. It is righteousness of Christ that is credited to us. It is favor. It is grace. And it is passive.

Luther calls this Christian righteousness. And it is the basis of the whole Reformation. It is the righteousness of Jesus given to us. We are declared righteous. It is thus perfect, good, complete, faultless, beautiful, and eternal. And it available to all lost sinners who repent and believe the Gospel.

In fact, as our Gospel reading suggests, Jesus even has the joyful work of tracking us down first to deliver that credit to our account before God. He seeks us out. He pursues us. And He does that work right here. This seeking and saving mission of Jesus happens in the Word rightly proclaimed and the Sacraments rightly administered.

But what we see with the Pharisees is the other kind of righteousness. It is a righteousness by comparison. Now we often talk about two kinds of righteousness as a theological distinction. That is not what I am doing here.

Theologically both kinds of righteousness—active and passive—are good because they are in the right spheres. Passive righteousness is before God. Active righteousness is for your neighbor.

But this comparative righteousness confuses these categories. And it means that the Pharisees and the scribes in this story expect God to grade on a curve. They are a little bit better than the next guy—or so they think. They avoid particularly embarrassing sins. They keep up their good appearances. They never admit sin. It is instead carefully hidden, especially at the Synagogue.

And then they have a self-righteous indignation and anger for those who don't measure up. Righteousness by comparison means they have no tolerance for tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus addresses this false righteousness throughout this large section of Luke's Gospel. He confronts it with great clarity. In Luke 16:15, He says, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

These words bring us ultimately to *The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* later in chapter 18. And it is scathing. Only the tax collector repents. And so only the tax collector walks away justified before God.

Now, the righteousness of the Pharisees, comparative righteousness, leads to some unusual behavior. As we see in our reading, they grumble. But they also embark on some bizarre moralistic crusades.

They figure out how many steps one may walk on a Sabbath. They get upset with Jesus when he works on a Sabbath, even when that work is miraculous healing. They wash their hands, religiously, and are deeply offended by those who do not. They tithe their spices, but they neglect the weightier matters of the law.

And as you have probably figured, comparative righteousness is pretty easy to come by. Not just for the Pharisees. But for us too. It is easy to see ourselves as morally superior to the addicts, to the shop-lifters, to the people of the other political party, to the lifestyles of Hollywood and the sports world. We grumble about how bad things are for others—but we don't address anything in our own lives.

But this is sham righteousness. And it will do us no good on judgment day. In reality, this is nothing more than a judicial and spiritual stupor that God sends as judgment against people who will not receive His rebuke.

The key to understanding this passage is that there are not ninety-nine righteous people. Not in this room. Not in all of human history. The young man in Ephesus was right, none of us practice our faith perfectly. But that doesn't make Christianity less true. If anything, it shows us our great need to be rescued.

God does not grade on a curve. He won't grant eternal life to those who are just a little better than the next guy. There is no forgiveness based on doing your best. If you are one of the ninety-nine righteous who have no need for repentance, judgment day is going to be rough.

We need the righteousness of God imputed to us that day. We need it now. There is only One who is righteous. And you are not Him. Neither am I. We are all lost sheep. We all need to be rescued.

And so we are need of true repentance and imputed righteousness. As believers, we receive Christ from Father. And Christ offers Himself to the Father. The Father accepts Jesus and nothing else. And no one else.

And so, we must meet that day—we must meet every day—in Christ. Faithfulness will follow. Devotion is a necessary response. We will begin to look more and more like Christ. But Jesus will always be our only plea. Our only argument is Jesus. And this argument brings joy in Heaven.

So yes, you are one of the lost sheep. We need to think of ourselves as that single sheep in the parable—rather than as the ninety-nine who don't need anything from Jesus. Jesus comes for sinners. He seeks and saves the lost.

And so, on this basis, we heed Jesus' call. We repent. We follow Him. We live in Him. We rejoice in His announcement. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*