

The Extent of the Love of Jesus
Mark 2:15-17

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I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. Mk. 2:17

What better subject is there for a Valentine's Day message than the subject of love? What love is there that is richer, wider, deeper, more lasting, or more wonderful than the love of God shown in and through Jesus? So let us think today, then, of the extent of the love of Jesus.

The love of Jesus extends to sinners.

The founder of the Salvation Army was a man by the name of William Booth. When William Booth instructed his Salvation Army workers he told them, "Go for souls, and go for the worst."¹

That is the attitude of Jesus. Jesus said, 'I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' He went for souls, and he went for the worst.

The word "sinners" as it is used here in the Gospel According to Mark and elsewhere takes in a broad category of people. It refers, by and large, to persons who have rejected God and the ways of God. They are prodigals all, who are living in a far country wholly foreign to faith and to faith's ethics. The so-called righteous people, again by and large, think these sinners ought to be rejected by God for their rejection of God. They look upon them as unworthy, unfit, and unqualified to receive divine favor.

Not so Jesus! He says that seeking these sinners out, wherever they may be, is written right into his purpose. It is why he has come. "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." The pages of the New Testament show that the Lord understands these people, spends time with them, and enjoys the time he spends with them.

A man once said to me, "Would your church accept a lapsed Catholic?" There is only one answer to that question as far as the church that truly follows Jesus is concerned. And that answer is, "Yes!" There is acceptance for all because the love of Jesus extends to sinners.

The love of Jesus includes the righteous.

Already in the 1970s there arose out of Roman Catholic circles in Latin America a way of Christian thinking that has come to be called Liberation Theology. The writers and thinkers and workers originally behind Liberation Theology coined the phrase "God's preferential option for the poor." This phrase means that God cares deeply for the marginalized, the underprivileged, the oppressed, and others in a similar state. It is difficult, if not impossible, to read the scriptures

¹ Clyde E. Fant, Jr. and William M. Pinson, Jr., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. V (Waco: Word. 1971), p. 208.

of the Old and New Testaments and not find that God does have a kind of preferential option for the poor. They are always on God's heart and mind.

Even so, God's having a preferential option for the poor does not mean that the advantaged or ignored or neglected. Jesus welcomed the Pharisee Nicodemus who came to him with his interests and issues (Jn. 3:1ff). When that Rich Young Man came to Jesus with his questions and his concerns, the Lord looked upon him and loved him (Mk. 10:17-22 and par.). The advantaged are not disadvantaged when it comes to being recipients of the love of God shown in Jesus. Jesus seeks sinners, to be sure, those who neglect God and turn from God, and yet he embraces and loves the saints who have never turned away from God.

One of the first books written in the field of Christian Education is called *Christian Nurture*. It was written in the 1860s by a Congregationalist Minister named Horace Bushnell. His thesis was that the children of Christians ought to grow up thinking of themselves as Christians and never think of themselves as being otherwise.² In other words, God loves those who grew up in the church and who have not known another kind of life. The love of Jesus extends to sinners off in the far country, but it includes the righteous, too, who have always kept close to the fold.

The love of Jesus reaches you.

Now for the best part: the love of Jesus extends to sinners, includes the righteous, *and reaches you.*

Several people – perhaps you are one of them – suffer from what I call “The Dorothy Gale Sundrome.” The name comes from *The Wizard of Oz*. You remember how at the end of that film the not-so-wizardly wizard reaches for a black bag and pulls out a diploma for the Scarecrow, a testimonial for the Tin Man, and a medal for the Cowardly Lion. Dorothy, watching, is pleased for her friends, but, when the wizard turns to her, she says, “Oh, you have nothing in that black bag for me.” And so the Dorothy Gale Syndrome is the belief that good things are meant for everyone else but them.

This syndrome reaches into the Christian faith. There those – again, you may be one of them – who believe wholeheartedly in the love of God, thinking God's love to be beautiful, wonderful, and oh so glorious. But they think that wonderful love is meant for everyone but themselves. They see themselves as exceptions and say of God, “There is nothing in that heart for me.” “That gospel is meant for others.” “There's no benediction for my soul.”

If that is you, I want you to listen to this and take it to heart. One hundred years ago an old preacher saw a sign posted on a wharf along the Canadian shore. The sign read, “Receiver of Wrecks.” It was an advertisement for a business. It pointed to a company that bought boats that had been shipwrecked or otherwise battered into disuse. The person who posted the sign wasn't a junk man but rather someone who saw beauty and potential in the beaten vessels. He bought them and restored them.

² Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (1861, rpt.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 10.

That preacher one hundred years ago saw that sign and immediately thought of Jesus. Jesus is the “Receiver of Wrecks.”³ You may think you are impossible to love, too wrecked and too flawed to be accepted. But the love of Jesus that extends to sinners and includes the righteous reaches you! The task for you spiritually is to “*Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*”⁴

Well, with that I bring this sermon to a close, knowing full well there is no end to this topic. However much we say about the love of Jesus we can never say enough. It is a subject we can never exhaust. The love of Jesus extends to sinners, includes the righteous, and reaches. You. To God be the glory, now and forever.

³ John Henry Jowett, *The Friend on the Road* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), p. 116-118.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), p. 162.