

The Ministry of Forgiveness

by Harris Franklin Rall

Jesus' ministry of forgiveness was characterized by his association with sinners and publicans, and his emphasis on showing love and compassion to those in need.

Scripture: Matthew 5:3, Matthew 9:12, Matthew 22:9, Matthew 25:40, Luke 5:31, Luke 7:47, Luke 14:13, Luke 18:14, Luke 19:10

Topics: "Divine Forgiveness", "Christian Compassion"

Description

Harris Franklin Rall preaches about Jesus' compassionate ministry towards sinners, including tax collectors and immoral individuals, who were often marginalized and despised by society. Jesus' focus was on forgiveness, healing, and restoring hope to those who were considered outcasts. He challenged the religious leaders of the time by showing that God's love extends to all, regardless of their past disobedience or societal status. Jesus' ministry to the poor and suffering laid the foundation for Christian education, philanthropy, and missions, emphasizing the importance of serving others with humility and compassion.

Transcript

There was another class of people with whom Jesus came in contact at the very beginning of the Capernaum ministry. They are referred to as the sinners. Nothing in Jesus' ministry caused more comment and more criticism than his relations with these people, and nothing is more characteristic of his spirit.

The word "sinners" in these references is not used in exactly our sense. We must not be misled by the fact that harlots and publicans are sometimes specially mentioned in this connection. By sinners are not always meant the morally reprobate. The idea of sin depends upon the idea of religion. With the Jewish leaders at this time, religion meant the keeping of a great sum of rules which touched every part of a Jew's life. These were supposed to be the laws of Moses, all taken from the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, they consisted for the most part of the "traditions of the elders," the endless rules on all subjects that had been deduced from these laws and built up around them. In large part they centered about the idea of ceremonial purity. Everything was divided into clean and unclean: food, vessels, people, acts, and objects. Minute rules governed all these points as well as the endless routine of sacrifices, gifts, washings, bathings, prayers, penances, and the like.

To live this life according to the highest standards of that time required knowledge and leisure and money. The scribes were the experts in this field, and so are sometimes called lawyers. It took leisure because it required time to fulfill such a round of duties. It took money because it interfered with ordinary business. That was especially true in Galilee, where there were so many non-Jews, to mingle with whom meant impurity. The Pharisees were the strict keepers of the law. As such they were held in the highest esteem by the common people. This esteem they returned with contempt (John 7:49). The poor Jew in our large cities today is handicapped in just the same way if he is strictly orthodox. Many of these work only five days in the week. They will not work on Saturday and cannot work on Sunday, and sometimes they are driven to the pedlar's pushcart because men will not hire them in other occupations for only five days.

Of course the sinners included also the immoral. Among these the tax collectors especially stood forth. The tax-gatherer is not popular even today. He was doubly hateful to the Jews. In part the Roman system of farming out taxes was responsible. The contractor for a given province paid the government a fixed sum and squeezed this sum, and as much more as he could get, from the people. His officers, or agents, were the publicans whom we meet in the Gospels. Some occupied higher positions, like Zacch¹us, and were correspondingly rich. Some were of the rank and file, as, apparently, Matthew. Aside from their exactions, the Jews hated these because they were renegades, men who took sides for hire with the hated Roman master.

For all these people the heart of Jesus stirred with sympathy. They were as sheep not having a shepherd. He felt a special mission just to these classes, and he asserts it again and again. "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." He felt himself sent to save "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," "to preach good tidings to the poor."

Mark tells us in his second chapter of the beginning of this ministry. The crowds who followed Jesus because of the report of his healings had driven him out into the "desert places," that is, the untilled country. Now he comes back quietly to Peter's home in Capernaum, apparently for rest. But the people discover him and fill the house and the street. A poor paralytic, brought by his friends, can get to Jesus only by being let down through the roof. Jesus' first word to him, however, is not one of healing but of forgiveness. That seemed to Jesus the deeper need. The word stirred the ire of his enemies. What right had he to forgive sins?

A later event angered them still more. Situated on a great highway near the border of Herod's territory, Capernaum was an important place for the collection of customs, and contained a good many publicans. One of these, named Levi, had evidently heard Jesus' teaching and in turn had been noted by Jesus. Passing by the customhouse, Jesus calls him and invites him to follow, apparently to become one of the little circle of his regular companions. Not only did Levi, or Matthew, as he is also called, follow him at once, but he made a supper for Jesus, to which he invited his friends. All of them, of course, were "sinners," people who did not even make a pretense of keeping the ceremonial law; many of them were hated publicans like Matthew himself. The strict Jew would not have spoken to such men. To sit down at table with them was not only to scorn all the conventions of society, but to flout the laws which were the very essence of religion for these Pharisees. But Jesus saw in this his opportunity.

Luke records a similar incident, where Jesus sought out one of these men. It is the story of Zacch¹us, a "chief publican" and a rich man. The time is the latter part of Jesus' ministry, the occasion is his passage through Jericho, and Jesus does not simply accept an invitation, but selects the house of this despised publican for his stay (Luke 19:1-10).

The Gospels show us that a large part of Jesus' ministry was connected with these people. Luke especially brings out this side of Jesus' work. It was not simply that Jesus saw their need and gave himself to them; these people in a special manner turned to him. He found with them the response which the scribes and Pharisees refused. John had had the same experience (Luke 7:29, 30). The religion of formalism had left these people unmoved, or else they were of the poor who could not keep these laws. They had accepted the contempt of the Pharisees as a right verdict, and there was no hope in their hearts. Jesus' message of God and righteousness and repentance pricked their conscience. At the same time he stirred them with hope. They were to him not "people of the earth," but brothers. He made them feel that God cared for each one of them. He taught them to look up and say, "Father."

The response of these people to his ministry stirred the heart of Jesus deeply. Luke brings this out in an incident he relates (7:36-50). Jesus had been invited to the home of a Pharisee, when a woman of the city, evidently a notorious character, came in and stood behind the couch where he was reclining at table. She was one whom Jesus' word of forgiveness had reached and to whom it had brought a new life. Moved with gratitude, she had bought a flask of ointment, and now, weeping and wiping his feet with her hair, she poured the ointment upon them. His host, Simon by name, paid no attention to this act of devotion which supplied his own omission of courtesy, in that he had not washed the feet of his guest. Simon saw only that this was a sinner and that Jesus permitted her defiling touch. He could not believe that Jesus knew what she was. Jesus' answer was the story of the lender and the two debtors. Like the debtor to whom the heavy debt had been remitted, so these people showed a depth of gratitude which he had not found with people of higher standing. He found even more than this: a spirit of humility and openness and desire which was so lacking with the Pharisees (Luke 18:9-14). He did not minimize their past disobedience, yet in the end it was they who went into the kingdom of God and not the piously protesting Pharisees (Matt 21:28-32). The parable of the king's wedding feast sets forth Jesus' own experience: the invitation is refused by the people of standing to whom it goes, and it is the poor and maimed and blind and lame that at last come in (Luke 14:15-24; Matt 22:1-10).

This entire ministry of Jesus, in its teaching and healing and forgiving, is the beginning and source of that marvelous development of education and philanthropy and missions which has marked the history of Christianity. The Jews laid great stress upon alms, but with them it was just one more precept to be kept. Their interest was in keeping the law; Jesus' center of interest was not in the law but in his brother. Nietzsche has criticized Christianity from this point of view, calling it the religion of the submerged, the morality of the weak. He felt that there was a certain superiority or contempt toward the weak in all this pity. That was a misconception. The ethics of Jesus was that of the strong, only not of the strong living for themselves but for others. In his service was no spirit of condescension or scorn. Like our modern social service, which he has inspired, it was democratic; back of it lay the reverence for men as his brothers, as sons of the Father.

Directions for Reading and Study

Mark 2:1-17; Luke 18:9-14; Matt 21:28-32; Luke 14:15-24; Matt 22:1-10.

Read Luke 7:36-50 and compare with the story told in Mark 14:3-9 and Matt 26:6-13. Give reasons for or against the opinion that these refer to the same event.

As against the identification, note the characteristic words of Jesus in both instances; state the difference in their point and meaning.

Carefully look through chapters 4 to 8 of Luke, making a list of the deeds of healing and forgiving. Do they warrant the assertion that the third Gospel shows a special interest in the poor and suffering and outcasts?

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