



## 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Psalm 51:1-10; Luke 15:1-10

### Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (September 14, 2025)

Before he became the great theologian and apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was a well-educated Jew and very much convinced of the righteousness of his faith. He could not stand the absurd claims of resurrection “Christians” were making about their leader, Jesus, an enemy of the Jews and a criminal who died a shameful death.

Paul begins his first letter to Timothy with a **confession** about his former life as a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man who embraced, encouraged and justified violence. His fervor was not simply the zeal of a passionate believer: it was the zeal of one whose faith had become rigid, whose certainty blinded him to the pain of those who differed from him. In his conviction, religion became a fortress rather than a bridge; he looked upon outsiders not with curiosity or compassion, but with suspicion and hostility. The traditions and teachings that shaped his worldview offered him order, identity, and meaning, but they also drew tight boundaries around what he believed was right and true.

The purity he was seeking excluded any dissent or deviation. Paul was convinced that the preservation of his faith demanded the exclusion and execution of those who threatened it. Religion, for Paul, was a matter of meticulous observance of the law, a strict obedience to the One True God where no deviance was permitted and any difference condemned. He was, in essence, a prisoner of his certainties, seeing only what his doctrine allowed him to see and failing to recognize the living presence of God in those he persecuted.

But by God’s grace, Paul’s eyes were opened, and he could see the suffering he was inflicting on others. He was forced to reckon with the limits of his

understanding and the cost of his blindness. For this, he is grateful to God for the unmerited mercy, patience and forgiveness he had received.

Paul's spiritual insight describes a **common experience**: We don't receive mercy because we are strong, smart, caring and righteous. Quite the opposite: God knows we need God's presence in our life to be able to stand on our two feet and feel safe, whole and at peace. The Divine Physician knows our soul needs healing. The Creator of life and Provider of spiritual gifts knows we need holiness, healing, goodness, harmony and beauty in our life. We need God.

No God, no justice. No justice, no peace. No peace but only hatred, violence, cruelty and dehumanization of both victim and victimizer.

It's only by an act of mercy and the grace of God that we become aware of our predicament. God will never give up on us and give us for lost. God will never consider us unreachable, unlovable and un-find-able. All people are worthy of God's longing and consideration, God's hospitality and care, God's mercy and forgiveness.

As Paul declares to Timothy, *there is immense gratitude at the realization that no one is beyond God's reach*. The experience of God's grace and goodness to us is so strong and radical that Paul is willing to challenge anyone: "What can separate us from the love of Christ?"<sup>1</sup>

It is by that great love that our sins are forgiven, our life redeemed, and our conscience purified. Through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, we find new life, resurrection joy and hope for a new day.

By grace we can see that even our sin is not an obstacle to God's deep love for us. Our sin hurts others as much as it hurts us. God mourns and longs for us to seek and find abundant life, richly filled with God's presence. God aspires to open our mind and heart to the realization that we hinder the experience of the divine in us and around us when we live unjustly and injure others.

Yet, the hate that divides sibling from sibling and nation from nation brings no healing, no resolution to the anxieties we bear over our differences. It is not

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:31-39

our distinctions per se that truly separate us, but the shadow of fear - fear of what these differences might require of us, how they might unsettle our familiar world, or demand a transformation we did not choose. We become wary of the unknown possibilities that diversity presents, suspecting that the unfamiliar might threaten our place, our comfort, our identity. Yet, when we allow love to cast out fear, we begin to see one another as fellow seekers on the journey toward wholeness, equally in need of grace and equally held within God's vast mercy.

Paul realized that he acted out of ignorance. He bowed to Jesus, the one he persecuted and now his savior, and was surprised that God would consider him worthy of the call to be God's messenger.

**Mercy is what Jesus, this olive-skinned Palestinian Jew, has come to offer.**

We can see it expressed in today's gospel.

Luke points out that "all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [him]."

**Tax collectors** were despised individuals who gathered income on behalf of the Roman Empire and then some. For many, they represented morally compromised people who were aligned with the oppressor of the Jewish people and profited from their position.

**"Sinners"** is a broader term used throughout the New Testament to describe anyone with a reputation for wrongdoing and an unwillingness to repent. They are society's outcasts.

Jesus' radical hospitality leads to **"grumbling"** among the religious elite. The Pharisees and scribes were disciplined law-keepers. As individuals who sought to carefully follow Jewish teachings, they would've understandably been scandalized to see Jesus, in the words of the psalmist, sitting in the company of "the wicked".<sup>2</sup>

**I can't blame the Pharisees. I am scandalized by Jesus' gospel of mercy.** I realize that when I think of the sinners I think of the drunk, the drug addict, the short tempered and violent, I have a hard time associating with them.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 1:1

But even more than that: I feel repulsion for those who *choose* a low life, the con-artists, the liars, the scammers, even if they are well dressed, refined and hide well in a crowd. They are the pedophiles, the dealers of death, the warmongers. They are the unrepentant thieves of all sorts, the profiteering.

I have a hard time not thinking of them with disgust and judgment, and yet Jesus has made a habit of having meals with them. With their persistence in sinning, they keep digging deeper holes for themselves.

I would surely rejoice at seeing them climbing out of them...from afar. Jesus, instead, is in the holes with them, offering compassion, a listening ear, healing.

In the context of today's gospel, Jesus teased people's common sense and expanded their imagination on the extravagant and extraordinary love of God for the excluded and expendable. Jesus spoke of God as unstoppable in reaching out to the scum of society.

He offered two stories for their consideration: one talking about a lost sheep and the other about a lost coin.

In the first parable, Jesus invites the mixed crowd of religious leaders and social outcasts to imagine themselves as shepherds. He poses the question: who among them would abandon 99 sheep just to search for one that has wandered off? Such a choice would seem foolish, risking the well-being of the majority for the sake of one.

Economically, losing the rest of the flock would be disastrous. Thus, Jesus likely assumes that no one present would actually make such a reckless decision. In practical terms, losing a single sheep is viewed as an unfortunate but acceptable loss—part of the risks inherent in tending a flock. One would cut his loss and move on.

However, Jesus presents God as one who refuses to rest while a single sheep strays from the flock. God's love is illustrated as outrageously crazy, irresponsible, risky, absurd and over-the-top. Such boundless mercy challenges every assumption of who belongs and who deserves care. It disrupts tidy hierarchies and opens the circle wider, declaring that nothing and no one is expendable in the eyes of the Divine. The joy is not reserved for

those who remained comfortably in the fold, but for the restoration of what was missing: a celebration so wild and full that it spills over into heaven itself.

The second parable, that of the woman who searches laboriously for the lost coin is even more poignant. What woman, especially if indigent, would fail to search for a lost coin? The woman has 10 silver coins or *drachmas*, which amount to about 10 days of wages for a common laborer: one coin per full day of work.

Jesus offers this example to describe God's frantic, desperate, urgent, persistent and besides-oneself love, again, for the lost, the last and the least. Jesus' commitment to welcoming the outcast and unwanted of society mirrors God's love. In a way, he is saying that we should ultimately be shocked at God's extravagant hospitality.

In fact, the way Jesus ends the parable is once again unpredictable and irrational. When the lady finds the coin, she doesn't hide it in a safe place. She chooses to spend it, and likely the rest of her money, on a party with "her friends and neighbors". Is she out of her mind? The picture is even more outrageous than the shepherd's feast. Our God is a God who celebrates finding the lost, without restraint.

The two parables pose some questions for all of us to consider. In what way do we participate in the celebration? Are we those who are being found? Are we part of the 99 sheep never lost? Are we the ones throwing the party? Are we the friends being invited to the party? Or are we, like the grumbling scribes and Pharisees, resentful and judgmental that there even is a party?

The parables unsettle neat distinctions of the worthy and unworthy, those who belong and those who don't, inviting us to imagine a divine economy, generous and bold, where restoration is preferred over retribution, and where relationships are prioritized over rules and norms.

The challenge, then, is to allow ourselves to be swept up in the joy of reunion, to see not just the cost but the value of every person.

Let us join the wild, irrational celebration and come close to the heart of God. God's love risks everything, waits, searches and rejoices. Let's be part of the miracle of being found and brought home. Amen.