



# Jesus and Welcoming the Outsider

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Christians have a long and deep history of welcoming the outsider. It is something integral to our way of seeing the world, to our view of humanity. It is definitely something we fail at regularly, as we slip back into natural human tribalism and favouring of people we are comfortable with. Yet still, the very reason we can call each other to account on this and recognise it as a failure, is that it is integral to who we are as Christians.

Interestingly, in the earliest days of the gospel in New Zealand, it was the welcoming of the outsider which was key in the message taking root. This is most clear as the gospel-bearing ministers of the word were actually welcomed by various chiefs, perhaps most notably when Ruatara welcomed Marsden to preach the first sermon in 1814. This inverse welcome of the outsider, where the gospel was the welcomed 'outsider' is strangely fitting.

Two hundred years later, the report of the Commission on Doctrine and Theological Questions, which accompanied the recent Ma Whea? report, highlights the importance of welcoming the outsider – particularly in giving special attention to the voices of the marginalised. This principle underlies most of the report and is expressed most explicitly on pages 10-11 of the Doctrine Commission's report, part of Section B. The particulars of the expression on these pages are challengeable, but the basic principle is impossible to deny from a Christian point of view.

Probably the key reason this principle is impossible to deny is the way Jesus did exactly this – welcomed the outsider, gave special care and attention to the marginalised, and showed love and acceptance to those who were on the 'outside' of society. This phenomenon is seen all over the Gospels, but the Gospel of Luke is often considered to have the greatest emphasis in this direction. Indeed in Luke chapter 4, Jesus opens his public ministry by identifying himself in precisely these sorts of terms. He quotes Isaiah's words about good news to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed, and then says they are fulfilled in his presence (Luke 4:17-21). Not insignificantly, Jesus himself is then treated as an outsider by the people of his home town to whom he spoke, because they didn't like what he had to say. In the face of this he mentions the way God had sent people to 'outsiders' in the past (Luke 4:24-29)

The fullness of the working out of Jesus' concern for the outsider will not be seen in Luke's Gospel until the cross and resurrection have happened – after which Jesus sends his apostles to proclaim that all things are fulfilled in what has happened to him (Luke 24:45-49). But on the way there, there are some very significant and beautiful pictures of the way Jesus welcomes the outsider. And some of the key interpretive helps for this are in his parables.

Luke's parables are filled with concern for the outsider – the Good Samaritan is perhaps the most widely known in this regard, as it powerfully subverts our natural understanding of what it means to be an outsider, and breaks down walls in that regard.

But two other parables give great help to the understanding of Jesus' concern for the outsider, in the way they contrast it with the self-righteous comfort that we can have as 'insiders'. Firstly in Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables as one – the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son (the last of which would perhaps be better known as the loving Father, but that is another story). Vital to understanding the bite of this three-in-one parable is the context Luke gives us for them at the start of the chapter:

*"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2 NIV)*

Tax collectors and "sinners" were precisely the outsiders of their society: tax collectors because they betrayed their countrymen and took advantage of them for personal gain and the benefit of the occupying powers; and "sinners" because they were morally corrupt, and no doubt very damaging to society. They were not only outsiders, but in many ways understandably outsiders. In our society we like to think we have a lot of time for the outsider, but we still have people who are beyond the pale for us – perhaps most obviously sex offenders (especially paedophiles) and people who deal drugs to children. These tax collectors and "sinners" are probably somewhat similar, in terms of their place in (and effect on) society.

But notice, it is precisely the fact that Jesus welcomes these outsiders that causes the problem for the Pharisees and teachers of the law. His welcoming of them affirmed them, in their eyes, and was frankly not on for a notable Rabbi. Jesus had been at it for a while too, and the Pharisees and others had been engaging him about it (for example, 5:30-32, 7:33-39). Now it seemed his welcoming of these people was catching – the tax collectors and “sinners” were gathering to him, seemingly in some numbers, to hear what Jesus had to say. His continued welcoming of them, to the point of eating with them, was disturbing to the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Jesus’ response was, as so often, teaching in parables. And it was a pointed response. As the sheep is found and the coins are found, there is great rejoicing. Jesus says this points to a party in heaven over sinners repenting (15:7, 10). The clear implication for the Pharisees and tax collectors – they were missing the party. But vitally, this wasn’t just any party – it was the party *in heaven*. They were missing the party God was having over these sinners and tax collectors coming to Jesus. This is made even clearer by the final part of the three in one parable, the prodigal son. Here the second brother is left at the end of the story standing outside the party, refusing to join in with the Father’s rejoicing at the return of his lost son (15:28-32).

With all of this of course, another key thing the Pharisees and teachers of the law were missing is highlighted by Jesus – the coming of the “sinners” and tax collectors to Jesus is tied up with their *repentance* – the party in heaven is over the sinner who repents, who turns back to God, who returns to the Father and is warmly welcomed. Perhaps this phenomenon of Jesus generating repentance in people is fleshed out most fully in chapter 19:1-10, where a chief tax collector (and arch-outsider), who is called a sinner (19:7) and identified as lost (19:10), encounters Jesus’ welcome, and in turn welcomes Jesus into his home. He is thoroughly changed through this encounter.

The beautiful and yet cutting themes of chapter 15 recur just a couple of chapters later, in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14). Again the context is vital, where in verse 9 we read:

*‘To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.’ (Luke 18:9 NIV)*

We see here a powerful description of the sort of attitude that has come up over and over again in characters like the Pharisees and teachers of the law. It is an attitude, it must be said, that church people of all stripes are very inclined towards. On the one hand we have the safe boundary creating of evangelicals which mean our welcome is cool at best to anyone outside our idea of ‘okay’. On the other hand, there is the person who is quite confident of their own liberal moral superiority because they accept all and anyone – except of course, those who disagree with them about what acceptance means, because such people who disagree with them are clearly fundamentalists and dangerous to society.

It is notable that Jesus’ parable here contrasts a *Pharisee* who is indeed, to judge from his own prayer, living an exemplary religious life, with a *tax collector* who identifies himself as a *sinner* with an attitude that can surely only be described as repentant – even if the details of such repentance are not played out here beyond the admission of his sinfulness (again, see 19:1-10 for a tax collector who seems to play this all out). The recurrence of themes is not accidental, and the sting in the tail should not be missed: the tax collector goes home justified, in a sense welcomed by God. The Pharisee – not so.

Jesus’ welcome of the outsider, so powerfully presented to us by Luke, is frankly something we cannot avoid. It is thoroughly uncomfortable if we are too comfortable with our current groups of friends or church membership. It is a welcome that is particularly extended to those on the margins of society, but a welcome which in fact pushes us all to identify ourselves as moral outsiders, and to turn in repentance. It is a welcome which challenges all, those on the margins and those more comfortable, to repent and be changed by Jesus – which means we ought to welcoming all bar none, and at the same time expecting all whom we welcome to be changed along with us as we together encounter Jesus and are changed by him. Finally, Jesus’ challenging welcome points us to the fact that if we do start to try to avoid or domesticate the beauty and power of his welcome, we are the ones who are really in the perilous situation.