

The Woman Who Anoints Jesus

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[0:00] So today we conclude our series that we've called Meeting Jesus. And over the last six weeks, we have seen Jesus engage with a variety of people, coming to him with many questions, different challenges, varying circumstances.

! And today, as we've just heard, Jesus meets and is anointed by a woman. And it's an encounter which is actually recorded in all four Gospels.

And when you have a story that's recorded multiple times in the Bible, it's worth noticing not only that it might be significant, but also the subtle differences in the way that it's described.

As these can throw a light on what the writer is hoping to kind of draw your attention to. And here, as we've just heard, it's in Luke's Gospel, the account that he wrote.

And there, the focus actually is not so much on the woman, although we do meet her, it's in fact on the host of the banquet who receives much of Jesus' attention.

[1:10] And the first thing that we discover about this host is that he is a Pharisee. Now, I've always felt that the Pharisees get a bit of bad press.

Now, if we're not too careful, they become the sort of pantomime villains of the Bible. Boo, hiss, you know, whenever they enter. Now, the Pharisees were a group of religious leaders in and around the time of Jesus.

And they sought to uphold the teachings of Israel. And if you think about it, in the context of Roman oppression, they would have been encouraging the worship of Yahweh instead and against the ways of Rome and the ways of Caesar.

And so the Pharisees, they stood as sort of pillars of distinctiveness for the people of Israel, encouraging them to live by the laws that were given to their ancestors rather than by anything else. And the Pharisees, in contrast to the Sadducees, who I believe you met one of those a few weeks ago, they were another ruling religious group.

[2:16] The Pharisees weren't so much interested in the institution of the temple and all its politics. They just wanted to see people's hearts aligned to the word of God. In many ways, they were the Bible-teaching vicars of their day.

And I've therefore always had a soft spot for them. And this particular Pharisee was hosting a meal to which he had invited Jesus. And as you read through the Gospels, you'll realise that Jesus is not all that together well received by other religious leaders and Pharisees.

And so this Pharisee has really kind of stepped out. He's gone beyond the normal, taken a social and a status risk to invite Jesus to his home.

Brownie points to him. Well done. And to top it all, this Pharisee is called Simon. What a guy.

Shouldn't we all be like him? Well, it turns out Jesus has something he needs to teach, Simon. In fact, when I sat down with this passage a couple of weeks ago to start my preparation in earnest, I read it through.

[3:31] And when I got to verse 42, I couldn't help feel that God was speaking directly to me. Jesus said, Simon, I have something to tell you. And it turns out he does.

And as you'll soon find out, this actually has had a huge impact on me as I've studied it. Because as soon as we'll soon discover, this encounter with both Simon the Pharisee and the woman who anoints Jesus, it will help us understand why some people come to church, they may be very involved, they might even wear a dog collar, yet they're quite distant and they're judgmental. And their lives seem to be unaffected by worship. And they make people around them feel worse rather than better. Perhaps you know some people like that. And yet there are others who come to worship and they are transformed by Jesus.

They live lives of generous love. They're authentic people. They're sacrificial. They're warm. And they worship with abandonment and with passion. Now, I don't know about you, but I want to be more like the latter.

But I know I have plenty of traits of the former. You see, the Simon of this passage, a bit like this Simon, has always tried his best.

[4:58] My upbringing was one of compliance. I'll say it like that. Well behaved, good manners, always regarded as mature for my age.

Yet, in hindsight, there was a big shadow side to this perfectly middle class way of being raised. There's quite a lot of motivation to behave based on pride.

You know, I wasn't to be like such and such or behave in such and such a way. Because reading between the lines, that would bring shame on our family. We don't go that low.

In fact, you're best keeping away from those types of people and what they do. And that's the best strategy, really, for living life.

And so when I look back, a lot of my behavior was driven by fear. Fear of going it wrong. Fear of letting people down. And of course, the Bible provides plenty of fodder to support that kind of motivation in life.

[6:04] You know, there's plenty of rules to keep. There's plenty of fear-mongering that you can use and utilize. But something was, and to a certain extent still is, lacking.

And what is lacking is revealed in this encounter. Because as I said, Simon has gone out of his way to host a banquet to which Jesus is invited. But into this banquet enters a woman who was not on Simon's guest list.

Now, this day and age, it might be a little bit difficult to imagine what this banquet might look like. No doubt Simon had a bit of a fair-sized property. And the banquet space would have been open and his guests would have reclined at low tables.

And so when this woman enters, she would have found Jesus reclining. And we're told that she stands behind him, weeping.

Weeping so much that tears fall onto Jesus' feet. And then she knelt down. Using her hair, she wipes his feet.

[7:17] And she begins to kiss his feet. And then she takes a jar of alabaster, an alabaster jar of perfume. So hugely costly and precious.

And she breaks it over Jesus. Over his feet. Releasing what must have been a sort of sensuous aroma across the whole gathering.

It was an act that was vulnerable, intimate, and lavish. And it would have caused quite a stir.

You can imagine kind of murmurs rippling across the room. Because these locals, they knew who this woman was. Certainly Simon did.

This was a sinful woman. Now, we don't know exactly what she did. But it certainly wasn't in the rules. And she'd done enough of it to be labelled a sinful woman.

[8:20] In the sight of the law and in the sight of society. Shame on her. That's the impression you get. And to Simon's mind, the fact that Jesus allowed even this woman to touch him.

Let alone perform such a lavish, intimate act. Well, that dented his estimation of Jesus' spiritual status. Perhaps this man isn't such a prophet as everyone says he is.

He thinks to himself. You see, for Simon, and for so many people, holiness is about how distant one can be from things and people that might contaminate you.

Avoidance and prohibition are the tools so many use and employ to keep their self-righteous status aloof and above others.

And that has the effect, of course, when you stand aloof of looking down your nose slightly at people. I remember being told as a teenager, Simon, you don't suffer fools lightly, do you?

[9:33] Now, as a teenager, I didn't even know what that phrase meant. But I am now realising that the impact of my pride must have been having on those around me. But for Jesus, holiness and righteousness come from an entirely different place.

And they have a completely different effect on people around him. So, sensing the contours of Simon's heart, and I don't think to condemn Simon, but because he loves him, Jesus turns to Simon, answering his unsaid thoughts, and says, Simon, I have something to tell you.

And Simon, who is open, replies, tell me, teacher. And so we get this little mini parable that he speaks, presumably to all those gathered, but directed at Simon.

And it's this, two people owe money to a certain moneylender. One owes him £100,000 and the other £10,000. Neither of them have the money to pay him back, so he wipes the debt of both. Now, which of them, he asks Simon, will love him more? Simon replies correctly. The one who had the bigger debt forgiven. Now, this puts a finger on the difference.

[11:03] The difference between a cold religious type and a passionate worshipper. Knowing forgiveness. Jesus continues.

Compare and contrast, says Jesus. You, Simon, did not give me any water for my feet, but this woman wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

Therefore, Jesus says, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little, loves little.

Now, I have to say, this made me laugh. When I was reading a couple of weeks ago, I've opened my Bible, I use at home, and I noticed that these verses had a highlight through them.

[12:08] Not because they hold the heart of what Jesus is trying to teach us here, but in the margin, I'd scribbled, but when was she forgiven? Forgiven. Because perhaps in only a way a Pharisee can, my main concern was about getting clear the order of the doctrine of forgiveness.

You know, surely this woman must have met Jesus before, he must have explained the gospel, the atonement, and given her absolution, so that she knew she was forgiven, and then her act of worship must have followed.

Otherwise, you know, these actions would be perceived as if you can kind of earn your forgiveness.

Oh, my goodness me, it had me all in a tither. But all we know, all we see in this passage, is that Jesus says that how many sins are forgiven, because her great love shows it.

And then afterwards, he declares to the woman, your sins are forgiven. This woman, however she knew it, knew enough about Jesus to know, A, that he was worthy of her love, and B, that if she came to him, he would give her everything she needed.

And in this case, it was the forgiveness of her sins. You know, we don't need to know it all, or have it all worked out, before we come to Jesus. We don't even need to know what it is we need.

[13:27] The grace and mercy that flows from Jesus, flows before we've even understood who he really is. And that grace and mercy is enough. The woman instinctively knew Jesus was good news.

This was no mere man. This man was a source of life and love. This was a man who could do only what God could do, to forgive sins. And as he declared forgiveness of sins to that woman in this banquet, people were shocked.

They had far less of an idea of his true identity than this woman. Despite their superior religious knowledge, this woman really understood who Jesus was so much more.

This was the Lord of love. This was the source of grace and truth. The one who holds the key to freedom and unlocks our hearts from all that prevents it from knowing love, giving and receiving love.

And her actions demonstrated it, didn't they? In her mind, Jesus was worthy of such an act of lavish, costly, passionate, intimate, public worship.

[14:52] This was a woman who knew she needed forgiveness. Simon was a man who thought she needed it, but that he didn't.

Jesus says, those who are forgiven little love little. So I'm estimating there will be at least two types of people listening to this this morning.

There will be those like me whose hearts are more shaped, if we're honest, like the Pharisees. Our tactic through life has been to avoid, to steer clear of wrong things and wrong people.

But that has also caused us to avoid our own hearts. which have gone wrong. We've so wanted to protect ourselves from hurt and failure that we've wrapped our hearts, our inner being, in some sort of blanket of protective aluminium foil.

Can you imagine that? And what a layer like that does, it prevents anything getting in and also getting out. that's why we lack love.

[16:14] We lack love for God. We lack love for other people, especially those who are different from us. Again, seeing myself in this story, when I look back at so many of my relationships, even with past friends and parents, so much of this has been based on avoiding conflict, trying not to step on other people's toes, seeking their approval, not wanting to let people down, getting

validation from others that, you know, I'm good, I'm okay, I'm alright, I'm accepted.

Now, if that's sounding a bit like you, please don't beat yourself up. This posture has protected you and I through life. You know, it's kept you alive even, you've learnt this behaviour because that is how you survive in the world.

But Jesus doesn't want us to stay like that. Jesus has something he wants to tell you. Those who are forgiven little, love little.

And probably you see, and you might see already, that that self-protectiveness is propped up by pride and self-righteousness. Sometimes that can masquerade as self-pity and rage.

Self-pity and rage, they sound a little bit more dangerous, don't they? And that is sin. And that needs forgiving by God. So, maybe this morning God wants to free up some Pharisees here to live lives of lavish love, of true holiness and true righteousness, to have relationships that aren't all about just not avoiding treading on eggshells and running from fears, but where actually forgiveness is freely offered and freely received, where there are ruptures and there's always ruptures in relationships.

[18:14] Rather than avoiding them, actually, we can recognise those ruptures for what they are and we can repair them. That's certainly what God's been speaking to me about as I've engaged with this story.

But maybe there are also those here this morning who relate much more to the woman in the story. Your life is broken and you know it. You don't need the preacher to labour the point.

You're aware of your sins. And I'd say to you this morning, and perhaps Jesus does, don't let the Pharisees around you put you off. Come to Jesus.

He has got everything you need. He will forgive and continue to forgive you your sins and set your lives free to live lives of lavish love.

And you know what? Just like this story, Jesus holds you up as an example of grace in action. Come to him.

[19:21] Thank him. Worship him with abandonment for he is good. folks, we want to be a church community that is increasingly inclusive, intergenerational and inspired.

To be those things, we need to be a church that is forgiving freely, casting away those pharisaical mess avoidance strategies, and instead getting stuck in to the mess of relationships, and the mess of our own hearts, really getting to grips with who we are and what shadow sides lie there.

And also not afraid to be with those who also need forgiveness, and that's all of us, and that's everyone outside this building and outside our church community.

1 John 4 verse 8 says, there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

love. In Jesus, we need have no fear of punishment, because in him is perfect forgiveness, because his perfect, lavish love demonstrated with such abandonment and vulnerability and costliness as he poured out his tears and his sweat and his blood on the cross.

[21:01] That is the love of Jesus. That love is poured out on us, the undeserving, not just on our feet, but into our hearts by his Holy Spirit.

As we finish now, my questions are simple. Will you receive it? And will you share it? Let's just be still.

And perhaps like me, God has something he wants to tell you. Please may may Thank you.