

Biblical Principles of Giving in Response to God's Grace

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Preacher: Rev. David Firth

[0 : 00] Well, thank you to Clive and to the folk here for the opportunity to come and to share with you.

As Clive said, I teach Old Testament at Trinity College in Bristol, so I've got at least a few familiar faces who are here. The good news is that they're not completing the sermon evaluation form on me today, which is nice, so I don't have to worry so much. And of course, the thing that's going to shock them is that I'm preaching on the New Testament. Ordinarily, one of the things that goes with being the Old Testament tutor is that whenever there is an Old Testament reading, and since Trinity is an Anglican college, there is almost always an Old Testament reading, you do feel compelled that you should preach the Old Testament text on the assumption that almost no one else ever will. Can I say, I did a survey in my first couple of years at Trinity, and over the readings where we had Old and New Testament and Gospel, there were three times in my first year that an Old Testament text was preached on. I did two of them. We just want to know who the strange person was who did the third, but there we are. So it's a shock for them to hear me preach the New Testament, but now that I'm just out here as a minister of the Gospel, I am allowed to preach the New Testament, so that's all well and good. If the tech team could perhaps have that passage from Luke 7 up for us, that would be a great help, because I'd like us to be able to look at it and refer to it as we go through. But as I was preparing for this morning, and I received the notes about your series on giving, I received some notes as well, and there was a story which was given to me, which I believe some of you will have seen, and since I don't feel the need to reinvent the wheel, if there's a really great story, why should I come up with another one? I decided I'll read this story to you. So those of you who have heard it, my apologies. Those of you who need to hear it again, that's fine. And those of you hearing for the first time, well, you'd better listen. An old story is told about a young man who, while travelling in the southern states, came across a slave auction. He was shocked and sickened as human beings were sold off as property. Eventually, a young woman was pushed onto the platform. The young man watched as two men bid against one another, all the while laughing about what they were planning to do with her. Anger welled inside the young man, and finally he yelled out a bid equal to the value of his whole estate. The crowd was stunned, and the young man went to pay the auctioneer. Turning to the slave, the young man said, young lady, you are free. She said, what does that mean? It means I've bought you, and I am setting you free. Here are your manumission papers, he replied. Does that mean, she asked, that I can be whatever I want to be, go where I want, and say what I want? Yes. The girl with tears streaming down her face said, then I will go with you.

All I want to do is serve you. As we think about this story in Luke's Gospel, let's keep that story also in mind. Because although this story in Luke's Gospel is fundamentally about Jesus, as we were reminded in chapel, the Gospels are not about us, they're about Jesus. Nonetheless, one of the things that we understand when we see who Jesus is, and the forgiveness, and the grace that he gives us, that one of the things that emerges in response is giving which flows from love. That as grace has been experienced, so we discover the love that is ours for Jesus, and there is an overflow of that that expresses itself in how we give. Well, to see that, of course, we do need to look at the detail of this story, because what we have is a rather strange dinner. Let's have a look verses 36 to 38.

Now, one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume. And as she

stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. Now, if you've read the Gospels at all, and I'm hoping at least some of you have, if you haven't and you're a final year student at Trinity College, you've got big problems. Others, you can still catch up. There are surprises here. Here is Jesus eating dinner with a Pharisee. Now, for the most part, the Pharisees come across in the Gospels pretty badly. They are the hardline, ultra-alt-right opposition to everything that Jesus is trying to do. Whatever Jesus is trying to do must be bad, and they're going to stop him. Although, as we read the Gospels slightly more carefully, and also into Acts, where Luke records how a number of Pharisees became obedient to the faith, we realise that that's not true of all of them. But there was certainly some, and they were at the lead of it. But not all. And here is a Pharisee inviting Jesus to dinner. Now, it's clear that this is not just a quick snack. And now, to understand that, I am going to need some volunteers.

[6 : 18] One of them is called Jay, and the other is called Elliot. So, if I can get you to... Yes, listen. Right. Now, imagine you've come to dinner at the Pharisees' house. How are you going to set yourself up for dinner? I don't know. Okay. You remember the words said they were reclining?

Oh, yeah. Cool. Okay. So, you're going to sit down on your side. Now, Jay, you're a South Pole, and automatically I see the problem. Oh, no. You're on your right arm. You cannot possibly be on your right arm and eating with your left. Your left is kept for a rather different function.

I'm not going any further on that particular one. But... We're good. We're good. Okay. Even so, let's assume they didn't have hand sanitiser. Right. Well, yeah, I know. And this is not good. Yeah, okay. Okay. So, we've got two South Paws. We're making it hard for them. Clearly, this was a difficult thing in the ancient world.

So, there's a table here in front of them. So, if the table's in front, you're not going to have your feet towards the table, are you? So, your feet are going to go back that way. Yeah. Thank you very much.

I can imagine the first thing. Yeah, okay. So, you're eating the air on your left hand, and, you know, we've got the banquet in front of you. Don't eat any of this, because some of this is reserved for sacrament coming up. But, you know. So, there's the dinner on the table in front of you. Now, dinners in the ancient world were not... You've got to stay there for a while. I will let you go at one stage. Don't let it worry you.

[7 : 53] How can I recline like this? Well, if you want to recline... What are they really, like... You're kind of like... There's a cushion under your arm, which I haven't been able to provide. I mean, I can get a knee cushion from the back if that will help.

Carry on. Carry on. Okay. Right. Now, dinners in the ancient world were not quite as private as dinners today, right? So, if I invite someone to my house for dinner today, normally I will close the door, and nobody really gets to see what goes on. This is just dinner for us and my friends.

But you have to remember that houses in Judea opened up onto the street, and anybody could walk by and see that there is a dinner going on. Now, the important thing to note is, notice the gender of the people I've invited to this dinner. What do you notice about them?

Men. They've got that little Y chromosome that just makes such a difference. But people... Like, you're here, right? You can sit down. You're looking down, and there's the dinner taking place. You can see these people. It's part of the meal. And there is a woman. She's not invited. Yes, Adele, this is you. Come on. Now, she can't get to the table, obviously. It's not possible, because, frankly, they're all lying along the table, and there'll be others around here as well. But we'll assume for the moment that Elliot gets to be Jesus, okay? Don't get above your status here, Elliot. Right. And so, a woman is able to come and to stand. So, if you want to just come and stand, and you'll notice that the very nature of how the meal is laid out means that it's quite possible to be immediately above somebody's feet. Whereas, if you imagine somebody sitting at dinner at one of our ones, you're going to really have a lot of trouble, because you're going to have to sort of climb underneath here, and it's not going to work. All right. And so, there's this woman. Okay. I suppose you guys better actually be more comfortable at this point and go back to your seats if you want. If you want. I mean, you can stay here, but you don't have to. It's up to you entirely.

All right. So, you can imagine now how this woman knows that this dinner is going on. Everyone can look up, just like you can look down the aisle here, and see where the dinner is taking place. The men are lying around the table on their cushions, low table, and this woman comes in. But this is definitely getting all a bit stranger. This is a formal dinner. To have these arrangements where

you recline at the table means that the courses are being laid out. This is a big meal. This Pharisee is there to raise issues. He wants to know what's going on. And here is this woman who comes in, and she stands by his feet. And we don't know a name. We don't really know anything much about her, except that we're told in the story that she was a sinner. In tradition, she's often labelled a prostitute, but Luke doesn't say that. There's nothing in the story that necessarily says that's the case. But she's there carrying an alabaster jar of ointment. She has come because she knows that Jesus is at this dinner. And knowing that Jesus is at this dinner, which would have taken some time, she has brought something of great value. We don't know why. But while she's there standing over Jesus' feet, Luke presents this image where spontaneously she begins to weep. And as she's weeping, her tears are falling onto Jesus' feet. And you almost imagine the kind of, what am I going to do now? His feet are getting wet. What do I do? Well, she has slightly more hair than Jay's, so she's able to come down. And she takes on that lowliest of positions at somebody's feet. And she begins not only to wet his feet, the thing that she hadn't intended to do. But with nothing else, she dries them with the only thing that she has available, her hair. Why even the oil? Presumably, her intention was to anoint his head. That's what you would do. But having begun at his feet, that's where it continues.

[12:53] And as we look at this dinner, we know this is an unusual dinner. Now, there may be a sense in which you think to yourself, if you're a Pharisee and you invite Jesus for dinner, you know that things are going to be a bit strange at some point or other along the way. But we start to get this sense of who this Pharisee is as we look at verses 39 to 43, because he's really struggling with what's going on. I've got a slightly updated version of the NIV, which I think corrects one or two things. So you'll see some slight differences, but don't worry. When the Pharisee, this is up to verse 44, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner. Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, he said. Two people owed money to a certain money lender. One owed him 500 denarii, the other 50. Neither of them had the money to pay him back. So he forgave the debts of both. Now, which of them will love him more? Simon replied,

I suppose, the one who had the bigger debt forgiven. You have judged correctly, said Jesus. See, at this point, we finally get the Pharisee's name. He's called Simon, which is not terribly helpful because that's kind of like his name was John and, you know, there's Simons everywhere. He's Simon the Pharisee and that will do. But we notice that we get an insight into what he's thinking. And he's thinking to himself, if this Jesus was a prophet, you know, he's not at the level of, is this the Son of God or is this the Messiah? But, you know, he's at least prepared to allow the possibility this Jesus could have been a prophet. If he was a prophet, he would know what sort of woman this is. But here's the thing. He doesn't say it. But Jesus asks, turns to him.

He starts talking to him. Because Jesus not only knows what she is like, he knows what Simon is thinking. And so he asks a question. Now, one of the things we know that used to happen at meals around the Mediterranean around this time and was kind of standard practice, apparently at good dinners in Judea in the time as well, was that people would often play games of riddles during the dinner. You have to remember, I know this is a weird concept for many, but this was before smartphones. And therefore, part of the idea of having dinner was that you talked to the people who were around the table with you. I know, who knew that things like that could ever have happened? But people would play these sorts of games of riddles because you've got to do something to make the conversation interesting. And you can't be forever talking about my grandchildren or whatever, because eventually people get bored of your grandchildren.

And apologies to the grandparents amongst you. Your grandchildren are wonderful, but it does turn out that most people will still have a limit for your grandchildren. Not yours. That's an entirely different story. So you've got to have some way of making the conversation go. And so people would ask each other riddles. Now, has anyone here read *The Hobbit*? Okay, those of you who haven't, it is still in print. You can buy it and read it. It's okay. Now, in *The Hobbit*, there is a scene that some of you know, where Bilbo is underground trying to get away and he encounters Gollum. And they start playing a game of riddles, riddles in the dark. And they have these word plays and they're they're all very clever and working them out. What has roots that goes deep down? What touches up to the sky but has no leaves? It's a mountain. Those sorts of riddles. Now, Bilbo cheats. He says, what's in my pocket? And of course, he's not trying to play a riddle at that point, but

Gollum thinks he is. And therefore, it becomes under the rules of the game, a valid riddle. So when Jesus, let's leave The Hobbit for the moment, when Jesus asks the question, says, I have a question for you,

[17:47] Simon would think to himself, okay, we're now going to play the game of riddles. Riddles are okay. We may remember that Samson told some riddles at a wedding feast, although the outcome being the Samson story was rather messy. But we won't go into that one just at the moment. So these sorts of riddles would be a normal part of the question. But this is a form of riddle that becomes a parable.

And you can almost hear Simon's kind of, oh, is that all that you've got to be? You know, two people borrowed money, neither could pay it back. And the money lender forgave them, right? So 50 denarii in terms of contemporary purchasing power comes to about 5,000 pounds, 500 denarii in contemporary purchasing power works out about 50,000 pounds. If you want to know what those numbers mean in today's terms, that's roughly what's there. Don't, however, go to the Bureau d'Change and say, I would like to, you know, cash my denarii in for that because they won't do it for you. But that's about where it works out. And Simon is, you know, obviously not thrilled because it's kind of like, oh, come on, that's your riddle? Which one of them is going to love him more? I suppose the one he forgave most.

But Jesus, you'll notice, picks up on that and he introduces a key word. He says, you have judged correctly. The problem is you see that Simon had judged her, but he hasn't judged correctly from where this parable, from where this riddle was going. And from this point, we then have a slightly awkward conversation as Jesus is looking at the woman, but talking to Simon before speaking finally to the woman. And in doing so, we discover that actually Jesus now sees the woman as the host of this meal in a way that Simon wasn't. Just listen to the rest of the passage.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she 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, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love has shown. You'll notice that's a slightly different translation to what you've got in front, but I think it's a more accurate one. But whoever has been forgiven little, loves little. Then Jesus said to her, your sins are forgiven.

[20:52] The other guests began to say among themselves, who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus said to the woman, your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

So it's slightly weird. So which one of you were Simon, weren't you? So here he is. He's talking to Simon whilst looking at the woman.

Ever had that sort of conversation with somebody where they're talking to you, but they won't look at you because there is someone else who is going to be more important. And even by Jesus' body language at that point, he is making clear, and I'm making sure that I don't trip on my way back, he is making clear that there is something different going on here.

Now, it should be said that nothing indicates in the story that Simon had in fact been a bad host. There was no obligation for him to necessarily do any of those things. He wasn't obliged for a daytime meal to wash his feet.

He wasn't obliged to anoint his head. None of that is required. He has done everything that was normal.

[22:12] But of course, one of the things that I think many of us will notice whenever we're invited to someone's place for a meal is the people who welcome us are the people who do more than what is normal.

You know, the people who say, I know I've got a bottle of house red that I had tucked away, but you know what? There was a Grange Hermitage 55 that I was just keeping for a special occasion, and you being here could be the moment.

For those of you who don't drink alcohol, you can have an alternative form of schlur that's mentioned at this particular point. Whichever might seem better. And it's this woman.

It's this woman who has done this. She is the one who has not only acted as host, she's the one who has been generosity in itself.

Generosity that consisted in giving of herself. Giving of herself as she started to weep. And then taking that most menial of things and saying, his feet are wet, how do I dry his feet?

[23 : 16] And using her own hair. But more than that, because she had clearly come expecting to give. You don't come with a large jar of expensive ointment unless you are attempting to use it.

And all of this leads to the clincher. Her sins are forgiven, says Jesus, because she is loved much. Simon couldn't see the need for forgiveness.

Not for himself. And because he couldn't see the need for forgiveness, he was unable to show that love to Jesus that goes beyond normal boundaries.

But it's important to notice within the context of the story, and it's probably slightly clearer in Greek than it is in English, that the woman had already been forgiven. In whatever mechanism that had happened, we're not sure.

That's not recounted for us in the Gospel. So it's not the case that she comes and she acts and Jesus says, because you've done this, you are forgiven. This woman already knows that she is forgiven.

[24 : 24] She has in some way encountered God and knows forgiveness. And because she has been forgiven, all that she can do in response is to give and to give generously of herself.

And Jesus can make that declaration, your sins are forgiven. And the other guests at the dinner are sitting there going, who is this?

Because they know that only God can forgive sins. And this woman knew that she was forgiven. Whatever it was that had her labelled as a sinner before, whatever it was that in her society that said, you don't fit, you don't belong, you don't get invited to the table, matters no more.

Because Jesus, who is God incarnate, is able to declare that she is forgiven, that she can go in peace.

[25 : 28] And her response to being forgiven is to express her love, her gratitude to the grace that has been poured out upon her in her own giving.

And it's important to say that as we read on through Luke's Gospel, we realise that the grace of God through which Jesus forgives this woman is free to receive, but it was costly to give.

It is that which will take Jesus to the cross. It is that which Jesus says in Luke's Gospels, that anyone who would follow me must take up their cross daily and come after me.

It continues to be costly for those who follow Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously wrote at the start of his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, cheap grace is the enemy of this age.

What we are fighting for today is costly grace. The grace which cost Jesus his life. The story shows us, of course, that grace changes radically those who receive it.

[26 : 44] It reaches to the very heart of who we are, not only because we are forgiven. That, in fact, is the starting point, not a finishing one. What matters is what emerges from grace.

And that is the ability to see that Jesus is able to transform ourselves and also those that we may want otherwise to reject. More than that, it reminds us that if we are forgiven much, and every person in this room today is forgiven much in Christ, then the response to that is found in the generous giving of ourselves and also the generous giving of our resources, whether they be time, personhood, finance, because we want to honour Jesus.

In short, we've been given abundant forgiveness in Jesus and our love for him is shown in our giving.

Jesus said to her, your sins are forgiven. As we prepared to approach this table this morning, Clive reminded us of that reality as we confessed and he announced for us the forgiveness that is ours in Jesus Christ.

my prayer for you in this church is that you will discover the abundant joy of giving far beyond your budgetary targets, that the love of God, which is poured out into you, may abound more and more as you in turn seek to give and to share this love and to bless the community around you that experiences the grace that is made known to us in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 40] May the Lord bless you. Amen.