

A Sinful Woman Forgiven

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Please turn back with me to that passage we read together in Luke chapter 7 from verse 36 to verse 50 as we see the power of forgiveness, the power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness in our society is in very short supply. Maybe we've become rather forgiveness fatigued. After all, every day our news contains stories about the latest celebrity to have done something wrong. Maybe we've become cynical about forgiveness given that most of our top politicians of whatever persuasion regret more that they've been caught doing something wrong than that they did something wrong in the first place. Forgiveness has always been in short supply, not just in our society, but in every age. Because fundamentally, as the poet Alexander Pope said, to err is human, to forgive is divine. To err is human, to forgive is divine. As sinful human beings, forgiveness doesn't come naturally to us. Doing things wrong erring does, but not forgiveness. Only to God does forgiveness come naturally, and none of us are God. Now, in Jesus' day, forgiveness was in very short supply.

It always is when Pharisees are in charge and are calling the shots. When Pharisees are drawing up standards for how everyone else's standards for how everyone else should live, forgiveness is low on the list of virtues. Criticism and judgment are top of the league, but compassion and forgiveness are in the relegation places. Have you ever been at the sharp end of the criticism and judgment of Pharisee-type people? Pharisees at home, at work, in the church?

Luke 7, 36-50 is the historical account of Jesus' forgiveness and how that forgiveness is met with two different responses. Criticism from the Pharisees of His day and faith from the forgiven sinners of His day. The central theme of this passage is contained in this small parable of Jesus concerning the two men who owed money to a moneylender, and especially the words of Jesus in verse 47.

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little loves little.

You know, forgiveness may be in short supply in society, but given that the church is full of forgiven sinners is full of forgiven sinners, it shouldn't be in short supply here.

[3 : 12] I want us to consider this wonderful story under three headings this morning. First, we all need forgiveness. Secondly, only God can forgive us. And third, we must respond to forgiveness.

So, we all need forgiveness. Only God, or more specifically, only Jesus can forgive us, and we must respond to forgiveness. First of all, we all need forgiveness.

I sometimes wonder whether one of the reasons forgiveness is in such short supply in our society is because, by and large, we've lost the awareness of our own failures. We prefer to point the finger at the sins of others because it draws attention away from our own sins. The truth is that in this passage, everyone in this room is a sinner except Jesus. The woman who breaks into proceedings is a sinner with, as Jesus says, many sins. But so is Simon the Pharisee. He's a sinner also, even if in his mind his sins are very few. Well, Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to his home for a formal meal. Now, guests didn't sit at an upright table in those days. They lay down, and they, leaning on their left elbow, their heads towards a low table upon which the food was placed, and their feet were extended behind them. It was a formal meal to which important people were invited, but outsiders were also welcome to attend. They didn't eat. Rather, they stood around the outside of the room, listening to the conversation these honored and intelligent guests were having around this low table. On this occasion, the most unexpected thing happened. A certain person described here as a woman of the city, a sinner, stepped forward.

Step forward from the outside of the room to the inside. This description Jesus gives us in verse 37 leads us to suspect that she was probably a prostitute. So, she stands at Jesus' feet, which, as I said, were extended behind him. She's weeping, and her tears drop onto Jesus' feet. What an amazing thing.

The tears of a daughter of Eve, who later Jesus describes as having many sins. Drop onto his feet. [5 : 54] What a moving act of humility, love, and devotion. She knows that her sins are many, her heart is cut to the quick, and her tears drop onto the feet of Jesus.

Now, we don't know what tragic events had happened to her that led her into this life of sin. Was it poverty? Did her parents abuse her when she was a child? Was it just being a pretty woman in a society dominated by men? We don't know whether she was dragged into a life of sin or whether at the beginning she entered into it willingly, only to become trapped and a slave of this sin. I say none of this to excuse her sin. But what we do know is that now she's disgusted by herself and the life she leads. And so, standing at the feet of Jesus, her tears drop onto his feet. If we had said to her, you are a sinful woman, she'd have been the first to have hung her head in shame and admit, you're right, I am. She didn't need the condemnation of others. Her own conscience condemned her more than anyone else could. It wasn't just what she did that disgusted her, but who she was.

She knew that she was a sinner, but she was also deeply ashamed. Now, we weren't there, so it's difficult for us to put ourselves in her shoes. She didn't have much going for her, but what she did have, and surely this is something we must admire her for, she was honest in a way that nobody else in that room was. She knew that she was a sinner.

[7 : 39] She didn't try to hide it behind religion and respectability. She's not pretending that she's something she's not. She stands there weeping, and her tears come so freely they wet Jesus' feet.

She, of all people in that room, was honest about her condition before Jesus. She knew that she was a sinner, and she knew that she needed forgiveness. Well, then we have Simon the Pharisee. When he saw this woman and what she was doing, he said to himself about Jesus, if this man was a prophet, he would have known what sort of woman this is who was touching him.

She's a sinner. You know, what Simon says here tells us so much about the kind of man he was.

He talks of her so disparagingly, who and what sort of woman this is. You know, perhaps Simon knew only too well what kind of woman she was. Perhaps in this male-dominated society where men could get away with anything they liked, he had previously employed her services.

Who knows? She's a sinner, he says. So easy to point the finger at others whose sins are obvious and open for all the world to see. Sinner in those days was a name given not just to individuals, but to a whole category of people. The irreligious, those who worked for the Romans, those whose lifestyle was impure. The undesirable underbelly of society. And she was most definitely in that category. So, he points his finger at her and he says, she's a sinner. Now, what makes Simon the Pharisee's self-awareness so pitiable is that he is reclining at the table beside Jesus, the only human being in whom there is no sin at all.

[9 : 46] Simon should not be measuring himself up against the worst of humanity, the sinful woman, but against the best of humanity, that is Jesus of Nazareth. You know, when it's dark outside, our car windscreens look clean.

But when the sun shines through them, we see how dirty our windscreens really are. When the sun of the perfection of the holiness of Jesus shines, even our greatest acts of righteousness are revealed as the filthy rags they are.

Measured against this woman, Simon may be a righteous man. Measured against the Jesus who judges, not according to an external appearance, but according to the heart, he is a wretched sinner.

And what makes it all the worse is that he is blind to it. He is suppressing the truth of his sinfulness. It's for Simon's benefit Jesus draws the contrast between the woman with her many sins in verse 47 and the one with few. He may not be as open a sinner as she is, but a sinner he is nonetheless, a sinner whose heart is filled with unbelief as to who Jesus is, and whose heart is filled with the darkness of self-righteousness and lovelessness and legalism. A sinful woman weeps, and a Pharisee criticizes. The two, they don't have much in common, but what's most important is that they have this in common. They are both sinners desperately in need of a forgiveness that only Jesus can give.

I remember on one occasion speaking to a lady visiting the old St. Vincent Street church on Doors Open Day about what we believe as Christians. And when I explained to her that we believe Jesus died to take away our sins, she stopped in my tracks. She said, that's enough, she said. He didn't die for me because, you see, I've never sinned.

[12:08] Now, she was a very well-educated lady, but for all her education, she was blind and self-deceived. I've never sinned.

My question for us is this, are we blind also? We are all sinners who are in desperate need of the forgiveness only Jesus can give. Are we willing at least to be honest about that?

The second thing about this story, these are just basic truths, is that only Jesus can forgive us. Only Jesus can forgive us. You know there's something deeply attractive about Jesus, to people like this woman of the city. Aird in verse 34, we saw this last Sunday morning, Jesus is criticized for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners. What was it about Jesus that drew people like this to Him? Was it His gentleness, unlowliness, as the book title tells us?

He was certainly no pushover when it came to sin. It would be a fascinating topic to study why it was in Jesus' day. The underbelly of society, not so much the religiously respectable, the underbelly of society were drawn so keenly to Him.

Well, after this sinful woman does what she can for Him, Jesus says to her, your sins are forgiven. Your sins are forgiven, verse 48. In four words, Luke 7, 48, Jesus does what all the sacrificial blood of all the bulls and goats of the Old Testament could not do.

[13:58] He forgives her sins. All those thousands and tens of thousands and millions of sins that she'd committed, some of which to decent people like us are unthinkable disgusting and morally repugnant.

He forgives them all, every one of them. He does not say, you must do penance. He does not say, there must be a probation period. He says with just four simple words, your sins are forgiven. He does not say this to Simon the Pharisee or to any of the other guests reclining at table with him. The religious and respectable are left out. Only this woman receives the blessing of these four words, your sins are forgiven. Simon has spent his entire life trying perfectly to keep the laws of the Torah and the rabbis and being ceremonially and religiously blameless. He prays multiple times a day. He has given over his whole life to religious service, but over him are not spoken these words, your sins are forgiven. What sins he has, and they too are many, remain unforgiven. What is this disreputable woman of the city is forgiven.

Men? Those at the table with Jesus were shocked. Who is this, they say in verse 49, who even forgives sins?

The thing is, they're all religious Jews, and they know that the authority to forgive sins rests with one person and one person alone. God. Only God can forgive sins. And now Jesus does something that only God has the right to do. Those at the table, because they were religious Jews, they knew precisely what Jesus was doing and who, by extension, Jesus was claiming to be. Let's do the math.

Only God can forgive sins. Only God can forgive sins. Jesus forgives sins. Jesus is God.

[16:23] This is why Jesus can forgive all our sins, because only Jesus is God. Only Jesus can give us what we truly need and what we're looking for, even if we don't know it, the forgiveness of our sins.

We might ask, supposing the God of the Old Testament, the God of Sinai and the thunder and the clouds and the trumpets, suppose the God of the Old Testament had been in this room, the God of Abraham and Moses of David, the God who is holy, holy, holy, whose sins would He have forgiven? The God of the Old Testament was in this room. God was at this meal, and He chose to forgive the sins of the woman of the city, the sinful woman at whom the religious looked down their noses in disgust.

The God who made the sun and the stars, who set the seas in motion and established the mountains, He is there in that room, and He pronounces over her, your sins are forgiven.

But there's another reason why only Jesus can forgive our sins. It would not have been apparent to anyone in this room that day, but it would have become clear later. Namely, Jesus alone has paid the price of our sins. Jesus alone has bore the punishment of the sins that sinful woman deserved.

[18:01] Jesus paid her debt to God. She couldn't pay it, but He paid it by dying on the cross in her place. She owed the debt. He paid the price. She did the crime. His was the death. He took the blame.

He died the death so her sins could be forgiven. He canceled the debt of both, verse 42. Jesus alone has the right to forgive her sins, not just because He is God, but because He alone has paid the price on the cross. This is why the cross is central to us as Christians, because it was there on

that faithful day the Son of God loved us and gave Himself for us. Alexander Pope said, to err is human to forgive divine. And this is why the divine Christ alone has the right and authority on the basis of who He is and what He's done on the cross to forgive our sins.

In our society, forgiveness is in very short supply. It is not so with Jesus. His capacity to forgive us our sins is deeper than the ocean and wider than the sea. It's a mighty waterfall which crashes endless supplies of forgiveness for all who have sinned and come to Him in confession and repentance, like the sinful woman in Luke 7. There may be some here today who wonder to themselves, can Jesus forgive me of my sins? You see, I've done such horrendous and disgusting, degrading things in life which in my mind puts me beyond the pale of anyone's forgiveness. Can Jesus forgive my sins? To which the famous English hymn writer and poet William Cowper responds, that as a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel Jesus veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. Yes, that sinful woman of the city. Yes, all we sinners coming to faith to Christ.

The third basic point from this passage is that we must respond to forgiveness. We must respond to forgiveness. The central verse, as I've said, is verse 47, Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loved much, but he who is forgiven little, loves little.

[20 : 41] The key response to the forgiveness that only Jesus can give us is love. She broke social conventions. She came forward. She stood at Jesus' feet. She wept, she wept, she wept, and she wet his feet with her tears. She then undid her hair, which in the society of the day was taboo, and then proceeded to dry his feet with her hair. She then took an alabaster jar, and anointed his feet with costly perfume. This perfume would have cost a year's wages, so around maybe in our society, 33,000 pounds. It was costly indeed.

She loved Jesus because He was showing her that which her society denied her, forgiveness. And that love manifested itself in this act of humility and faith, for after all, in verse 50, Jesus says to her, your faith has saved you. We've got this intoxicating mix in this woman, faith and love. She's been forgiven of her many sins, so she loves much, and she believes.

This then is the reasonable response to that forgiveness that only Christ can give us, that believing in Him, we love Him. That believing in Him, we love Him.

By contrast, what does Simon the Pharisee do? He's deceived himself into thinking he doesn't need to be forgiven, so he shows no such exhibitions of love for Jesus. He's far too decent and respectable to even break social conventions for the sake of Jesus, who he does not even believe to be a prophet.

[22 : 38] But this woman, not only do we admire her for her honesty, we admire her for her extravagant response to the forgiveness only Jesus can give her. For her whole life, she's been at the sharp end of the condemnation of the Pharisees. But for the first time, she experiences peace with God through Jesus of Nazareth and his four words, your sins are forgiven. Her tears may have wet Jesus' feet, but only because His forgiveness first washed her heart. I wish I could spend more time in this passage. I wish we could go through it together verse by verse, drawing out all the beautiful meaning of each word and sentiment. But as we close, let me do so with three applications, very brief applications, each of which places faith in Jesus at the center of our lives, just as Luke places faith in Jesus as the dominant theme in chapter 7.

The first is this, faith and Jesus. That's the first application. Faith and Jesus. For all that we may admire and respect this sinful woman for her actions that day, Jesus remains the hero of this story. John Newton, who wrote that wonderful hymn, Amazing Grace, in his older years. In his older years, he said, although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly.

I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior. It is not any kind of faith that will save us. It is faith in Jesus Christ, because only He can forgive our sins. Only He can give us this peace into which He calls the sinful woman to enter in verse 50. Freedom from sin and condemnation. Hope for the future.

[24 : 58] Strength for transformation. This passage in Luke calls us to believe in Jesus, pure and simple. Christians of many years are not yet a Christian.

We need to remember John Newton's words. Although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly.

I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior. And so we come in faith to Him today, and whatever and whoever we are, He will forgive.

Faith in Jesus. Second, faith in love. Faith in love. Have we ever done something as remarkably extravagant and costly for Jesus as did this woman in Luke chapter 7?

At the end of the day, can we love Jesus more extravagantly than He loved us by dying on the cross for us? Will our love for Him be more costly than His love for us?

[26 : 11] In what acts then of extravagant and costly love shall we engage? Perhaps it's to devote ourselves to His service at work, at home, in the church.

Perhaps, even as it was in the case of this woman, our love for Him will result in life change that will turn our backs on the sinful lives that we've been leading and now live for the love and holiness of Jesus according to His Word.

Faith and love, it's a question for us all, myself more than any. How will I express my love for Jesus this day, this week, this year?

And then lastly, faith and forgiveness. Faith and forgiveness. If Jesus has forgiven our sin, why is it we find it so hard to forgive the sins others commit against us?

Our sins were many, but Jesus forgave them all. Their sins against us are few, but it's so hard to forgive them. If we're finding it hard to forgive others, Jesus' forgiveness gives us the motive and His example, the model.

[27 : 36] We are so like Simon the Pharisee when it comes to the sins of others, when in reality, all of us are like the sinful woman before God. Christ forgave us so much.

As a response, surely we can forgive the fewness of the sins others commit against us. This is the gospel at work, that having been forgiven by God, we become men and women of forgiveness.

Forgiveness in our world is in such short supply. Tragically, it's often that way in the church also.

Church is often the last place people struggling with sin come to for fear of criticism and condemnation.

Listen, what a community of people here, no better, no worse than that sinful woman. We all needed forgiveness. Only Jesus could forgive.

And by faith in Him, we're now responding in love to Him. So my final question is this. Which of the two characters in this story, Simon the Pharisee or the sinful woman?

[28 : 55] Remembering that story I told you of that lady who said to me, I don't need Jesus to die for me because I've never sinned. Which of these two characters in this story, Simon the Pharisee or the sinful woman, best represents the way you think about Jesus and the forgiveness only He can offer.

Thank you.