

# Forgiveness – at what cost?– Women’s lunch

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 12 May 2010

Preacher: Elspeth Pitt

[ 0 : 0 0 ] It's been lovely lunch, hasn't it? I've really enjoyed it. It's been a real treat to come here. And I'll tell you, we had a very interesting discussion, talking about the election a little bit and the aftermath of it. Don't worry, I'm not going to say anything political.

But, I mean, who just thought that this morning we'd be waking up to a coalition government, conservative liberal democrat? Quite surprising. And I do wonder, despite the apparent friendliness of the party leaders at the moment, what it will be like on the ground for people who've been fighting each other in the election and all those sort of party activists.

That might be quite a big deal, mightn't it? There might be quite a few things to forgive and forget. And that might be very difficult on the political arena.

Yeah, I do sometimes think that, you know, forgiveness can be talked about quite lightly, can't it? Whereas, in reality, we know that it can be a long way from a joke.

So I read an account by a lady who is in a concentration camp in the war in Ravensbrück. She was there with her sister because they'd been sheltering Jewish people. And she survived the experience. Her sister didn't. Her sister died there.

[ 1 : 1 1 ] And after the war, a former guard came to ask her for forgiveness. He'd been in that camp himself. And this is what she said. I stood there and could not.

Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, painful death simply for the asking? Well, we're thinking about forgiveness today.

And forgiveness isn't cheap, is it? It's a difficult thing and a costly thing. And perhaps some of us here have known the pain of a choice to forgive something done against us.

Or the grief and shame of remaining unforgiven and having to live with the consequences. So that's what we're going to think about just for a few minutes today.

Forgiveness and its cost. And we're going to do that just by looking at the story of two people who met Jesus. It's on page 25. 25 of the Luke's Gospels.

[ 2 : 1 7 ] Right down at the bottom of the page is verse 36, the bit that's headed, Jesus anointed by a sinful woman. It doesn't sound that encouraging, does it? Okay, I'm just going to read it.

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. 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 men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii and the other 50.

Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now, which of them will love him more? Simon replied, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled.

[ 3 : 3 6 ] You have judged correctly, Jesus said. Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You didn't give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

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

Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little, loves little.

Then Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven. 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. It was an interesting story, isn't it? I just want us to think about those characters in this story, just for a few minutes.

[ 4 : 41 ] The first one is that man, Simon. You do wonder what he makes of Jesus, don't you? People have been very critical of Jesus, calling him all kinds of things, practically accusing him of being an alcoholic.

Mixes with all the sorts of people, or not the ones that you should be seen with, if you want to get on in the religious world. The kind of scab and wrath of society. Tax collectors, prostitutes, down and outs.

I don't know what the equivalents would be for us. I suppose those, but maybe politicians, bankers, bankers, lawyers, Simon Cowell.

And yet, this one, this Simon, is curious enough to want to find out more, isn't he? So he invites Jesus round to his place for a meal.

He wants to find out if Jesus is a prophet, a man sent from God with God's message. But the trouble is that he leaps to the wrong conclusion. Because when this woman breaks down and wets Jesus' feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair, he concludes that Jesus can't be a prophet.

[ 5 : 48 ] Just have a look down at verse 39. 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.

But Simon's wrong, isn't he? Because Jesus is a prophet and more, and he knows exactly what Simon is thinking. That would be a useful skill, wouldn't it? I don't know, if you know what people are thinking, wasn't there a Mel Gibson film about that.

Although I'm not sure that I would want people to know what I was thinking. But anyway, Jesus knows what this man is thinking, and he tells him that story, doesn't he, about the two men who owed money to a money lender, one who owed him £500, to put it in our terms, the other £50. and neither could pay, so he forgave them both. And Jesus says to Simon, which one will love him most? And Simon's not very enthusiastic in his answer, but it's obvious.

I mean, you can't really get away from it, can you? So Simon would say, of course, it's the one who is forgiven most. And in saying that, it seems to me that Jesus not only shows Simon that he is a prophet, but he shows him the state of his own heart.

[ 7 : 07 ] Because his attitude to Jesus shows that his heart is as hard as granite. He doesn't think he needs forgiveness, so he's polite to Jesus, but there's no real love there for him.

He holds him at arm's length and judges him on his own terms. There are two big problems with doing that, though. And the first is that Simon really does need forgiveness, so he's wrong about himself.

And the second is that Jesus ends up passing judgment on Simon. He's against Jesus, so Jesus is against him. And as far as this story goes, that's as much as we find out about Simon.

And when you think about it, that's a terrible position to be in, isn't it? To be ticked off and then dismissed by Jesus. And of course, what's true for him is true for everyone else, too.

It's a really dangerous thing to think that we're all right and don't need forgiveness. Because we do, each one of us. The trouble is that it's a very costly thing to admit to.

[ 8 : 20 ] Aldous Huxley, the writer, described asking for forgiveness or accepting forgiveness as self-abandonment and said that the proud person prefers self-reproach.

Because, however painful, at least it gives some control in a situation, doesn't it? It's a very, very hard thing to accept that we need forgiveness.

But however hard it is, we still need it. Because no matter how costly we might think asking for forgiveness is, living and dying without it is even harder and leaves us cut off from Jesus forever.

Okay, so that's time and that's the first person in the story. And then the second person is the woman that we probably all noticed who in verse 37 is described as having led a sinful life in that town.

Well, we don't know exactly what she did, but you can bet your bottom dollar that everyone in that small town knew exactly what she'd done. She was notorious.

[ 9 : 28 ] So that's one thing we know about her. She was a sinner. Second thing we know about her, though, is that she had been forgiven by God and that she'd heard about forgiveness from Jesus. That's what the whole story is about.

She felt so good that when she heard that Jesus had come to Simon's house for a meal, she thought she'd go too, even though I don't suppose she was sent an invitation.

It's quite impressive gate-crushing, actually, isn't it, this? Because for her, it was a wonderful chance to say thank you. Now, I don't know if you know much about dinner parties in the first century.

I looked up a little bit about them and they weren't entirely like this one. So they're quite interesting, actually. So people, instead of, like, sitting down on chairs, sitting around tables, they would all kind of lie down, really, lie on couches to eat, you know, maybe a bit like TV dinners, something a bit more sort of flattened out than that.

So, and all the diners would have been facing inwards with their heads towards the centre and their feet towards the outside of the room, if that makes sense. Kind of like spokes in a wheel, that kind of thing. So would it be quite easy for this woman to kind of nip in and sort of anoint Jesus' feet without necessarily anybody noticing?

[10:46] But the trouble is, it didn't really work out like that because she became very emotional, started crying, let her hair down, started to dry his feet. Now, I can relate to that.

I quite often get emotional being Welsh at the wrong romance. Someone rings up for what they think is a calm conversation all of a sudden, like I'm in floods of tears. But, you know, she's in that situation, completely overcome, starts crying, and all of a sudden, she's in the middle of a big discussion.

And a lot of the people there would have been looking down their noses at her, wouldn't they? But Jesus doesn't. His compassion for her is obvious, isn't it? He tells her that she really is forgiven. And have a look down at verse 50, the very end of the passage. He explains why that's the case. It's because her faith has saved her.

That's why she loved much, because she'd been forgiven much, just like in the parable that Jesus told. The story doesn't tell us where she heard about forgiveness, but she'd have had plenty of chance.

[11:56] Because Jesus talked about it a lot. One time he said he was like a doctor. And just like doctors are there for sick people and not healthy ones, so he'd come for sinful people, and not for those who think they're good enough already.

Now, I don't suppose that woman would have had any difficulty in recognising herself as a sinner. She was notorious for it. And so she took Jesus at his word. He promised forgiveness for sinners, and she knew that was her.

And it made all the difference in the world. She knew what it was like to be accepted. She knew what it was like to be made clean. To be forgiven.

And it was so good that she risked exposing herself to shame and ridicule with a very expensive gift for Jesus just to say thank you. The cost came for her in response to forgiveness, didn't it?

She risked loving Jesus publicly. She could have stayed in her house, but she didn't. So I just want to ask you a question as we finish this afternoon. Do you know that experience of forgiveness?

[13:05] Do you know how good it is to be forgiven? Do you know what it is to be right with God? To be friends with him? And if the answer to that isn't yes, isn't it great that you're here today?

Perhaps some of us here might feel a little bit like that lady. Really conscious of mistakes made in the past. Things done that we really regret. That we find hard to let go of maybe that sometimes keep us awake at night.

Or that we find hard to forgive ourselves for. Well, if that's due, this story is a great one to take hold of, isn't it? Even the most notorious sinner in town could be loved and accepted by Jesus.

And if she could, so can we. Because the same words of Jesus apply, you can be forgiven. Jesus promises it for all who turn to him in repentance and ask him.

Perhaps many of us feel different from that. I don't know. There may not be many here who are notorious sinners. I don't know.

[14:18] But perhaps we don't understand sin in quite the way that Jesus does. Because being a sinner is not about being a very bad person, but about being someone who says no to God.

And more than that, someone who tries to live our lives as if we were God instead of him. Now, I don't know what you make of the new government. Maybe you think you could do better yourself. Maybe you could. But can you imagine going up to 10 Downing Street with a gun and telling the policeman on duty that you were going to take over as Prime Minister? We'd be flat on our faces

and locked up faster than we could blink, wouldn't we?

But that's exactly what we do to God every day when you think about it, isn't it? We run our own little worlds as if he, our creator, had no business in them.

And that's really what the Bible's talking about when it talks about sin. It's relational. It's leaving God out of his world, out of our lives. When instead of thanking God with all we are and all we have for the fact that he's made us and that he sustains us, we effectively slap him in the face.

[ 15 : 29 ] It's like pushing your granny down the stairs, isn't it? Or worse than that. That's sin. And yet, once we realise we do that every day to God, wouldn't it be a great thing to say sorry to him?

To ask him to forgive us for the way that we've lived. And the amazing thing about him is that he promises he will forgive us if we ask him to. Of course, we know a lot more about Jesus than this woman did.

We know not just that he was born and that he lived a good life. We know he died nailed to a cross, taking the punishment our sins deserve. And perhaps you've read the story or seen pictures of that man hanging there on the cross between two thieves and crying out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And the Bible tells us that's exactly what happened at the cross. That Jesus, the son of God, was abandoned by God. That he took the punishment that our sins deserve so that we can be forgiven, so that we can be friends with God.

In fact, if you read on in Luke's gospel, and I hope you will take these away with you and read them through because it's a great read. You can see that for yourselves. On the cross, Jesus prays for the forgiveness of his enemies.

[ 16 : 48 ] And promises a place in heaven to the thief, who presumably hadn't done much good, who dies with him. So that's forgiveness.

No wonder this woman came back and said thank you. She was overwhelmed by the wonder of forgiveness and with love for Jesus. And that must be true for us too, who know even more than she did, how much it cost him.

It's easy to forget how precious forgiveness is if we're Christian people today, isn't it? We can focus on all kinds of externals. I don't know, clothes, houses, and whatever else it might be.

And yet forget how wonderful it is to be clean on the inside. And if that's you, wouldn't it be great to make sure that you set aside some time this week to say thank you to Jesus?

Or you may have been listening today and thinking, actually, perhaps I am like that woman. I need forgiveness. Well, if that's you, today would be a great day to ask for it.

[ 17 : 50 ] If you want to do that, there's a booklet that you can take away which gives you a sort of form of words that you can actually pray. Or you may be someone who wants to find out a bit more about this Jesus who promised forgiveness for sinful people.

If that's you, why not take away something to read? A gospel or a small leaflet? Or think about joining a small group to take things a bit further.

Because I think there'll be one starting here soon. Well, my time is gone. Thank you for listening. Thank you.