

The heart of salvation

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] So we're in Psalm 51, which is on page 568 in the Church Bibles. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.

According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness.

[1 : 15] Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it.

You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.

[2 : 25] O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure. Build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings.

Then bulls will be offered on your altar. The reading is from Luke chapter 7, beginning at verse 36, and it's to be found on page 1041 of the Church Bibles.

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment.

And standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.

[3 : 58] And Jesus answering said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, Say it, teacher. A certain money lender had two debtors.

One owed 500 denarii, and the other 50. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which one of them will love him more?

Simon answered, The one I suppose for whom he cancelled the larger debt. And he said to him, You have judged rightly. Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman?

I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss my feet.

You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.

[5 : 15] But he who is forgiven little, loves little. And he said to her, Your sins are forgiven. Then those who were at table with him began to say amongst themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins?

And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Esty, thanks so much for reading for us. Please do keep Luke chapter 7 open, and let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this glorious theme we've been thinking about, the great compassion of the Lord Jesus. And we long, please, that as we look at your word now, please would you help us to grasp his compassion more clearly for ourselves, and to respond in a way that is spiritually healthy.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, this is the third of our series of New Year talks with the title, Take a Closer Look at Jesus.

And this is a passage, isn't it, which raises issues of guilt and forgiveness and love. I guess we might say they are three of the most powerful emotions that we experience.

[6 : 45] as we see what a genuine response to Jesus looks like. Remember that Luke is writing to give us certainty about Jesus, certainty about the salvation that he brings, a big view of Jesus, a big view of Jesus that results in a big discipleship, life transforming.

And just as a reminder, I've put our New Year maths equation there on the top of the sermon outline on the back of the service sheet. So far, in Luke 7, 1-35, Luke's given us a big view of Jesus.

He saves from death. He raises the dead. Indeed, he will usher in a whole new creation. And now, from chapter 7, verse 36, through to 8-21, Luke turns the question of discipleship and what a right response to Jesus looks like.

That is now going to be his focus. Today, Luke 7, 36-50, what a right response to Jesus himself looks like. Next week, Luke 8, 1-21, what a right response to Jesus' word looks like.

In other words, for the next two weeks, the tables are going to be turned. And so, rather than Luke having the spotlight on Jesus and the salvation that he brings, the tables are turned and instead the spotlight is on us and our response.

[8 : 15] Perhaps rather like when you go to an art gallery, Rachel and I went to the National Gallery recently to see a group of works by Degas on loan from the Burrell Collection in Glasgow. The blurb on the website explained, this is a rare opportunity to see stunning paintings, pastels and drawings by this leading French Impressionist.

In other words, the merit of the art itself was in no doubt whatsoever. And therefore, of course, it would follow that what I thought myself of the art, why, it was going to say far more about me than about Degas.

And in the same way, our response to Jesus speaks volumes not so much about him but about ourselves. Our key verse today is verse 47.

Have a look at it, will you? Luke 7, verse 47. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven for she loves much. But he who is forgiven little loves little.

We're going to see how Jesus contrasts two people, the responses of two people to Jesus. The one is a response that is costly, public, extravagant, shameless.

[9 : 38] The other is cold, formal, unmoved by Jesus. And I imagine that those two responses are represented in this room here this morning.

as well as everything in between. So I just want to ask the question, very simply, what accounts for such different responses? How is it that people can respond so very differently to Jesus?

And you'll see on the outline two parts of the answer. First of all, they think very differently about themselves. Secondly, they think very differently about Jesus. So first of all, they think very differently about themselves.

Verse 36, one of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him as he went into the Pharisees' house and took his place at the table. Imagine the scene as Simon invites Jesus to his home for dinner.

Now, we're not told why he did it. Perhaps he was just looking forward to an evening of polite theological conversation, or maybe it's to get a celebrity photo with Jesus, we're not told.

[10 : 47] But like any first century dinner party, it would have been a sort of semi-public event, probably held in the courtyard of Simon's house with others onlooking, people in the village sort of towing and froing through the evening.

The guests would have sat down, or sort of laying down really, around a central table with their legs and their feet splayed around, fanned out behind them. And then, horror of horrors, verse 37.

Behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

Now, I take it you and I are meant to imagine the caked makeup, the tatty jewellery, the unstable personality, the personal abuse that so frequently characterises women who walk the streets. Think, perhaps, of Christine Keeler, who died last month. As a 19-year-old showgirl in the 1960s, she was at the heart of the biggest political scandal to hit the British establishment of the 20th century.

[12:09] She is branded a tart by the Prime Minister. In later life, she struggled to get work, her marriages failed. She observed, I got all the blame and all the shame.

No doubt, this woman in Luke 7 had simply planned to slip in and anoint Jesus' feet, but unable to help herself and in the grip of deep emotion, she breaks down in tears.

And then, with nothing to dry his feet with, she makes matters worse by undoing her hair and using that. And for a woman to let her hair down in a culture where normally women would be veiled in public, well, I guess it's not far short of going topless around today.

And Simon is scandalised. Verse 39. Now, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.

What is he thinking? This may be the kind of thing that happens at dinner parties north of the river, but it certainly does not happen in Dulwich. And Jesus knows what he's thinking.

[13:30] You see, Jesus knows not only who this woman is and what sort of person she is, but he also knows who Simon is and what sort of person he is.

And so he turns and tells this little story in verse 40. Jesus answered, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, say it, teacher.

A certain moneylender had two debtors, one owed 500 denarii and the other 50. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?

Simon answered, the one I suppose for whom he cancelled the larger debt. And he said to him, you have judged rightly. It's a timeless story, isn't it?

There are significant amounts of money. Imagine two graduates leaving university. One with a debt of 5,000 pounds, the other with a debt of 50,000 pounds.

[14:34] The Chancellor, in his great generosity, decides to cancel all student debts. Which of the two students will love him most? Two house owners, each have a mortgage, one for 100,000 pounds, the other for a million pounds.

The bank, in its great generosity, cancels the debts of both. Which one will love the bank the most? I guess it's very challenging for Simon because Jesus is saying to him, you see, how do you think of yourself before God?

Do you think of yourself as someone with a huge debt that needs to be wiped clean? Or do you think of yourself as someone who can pay their own way before God?

Simon is a Pharisee. Luke has underlined that for us even in the very introduction in verse 36.

Twice, one of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him and he went into the Pharisee's house.

He is a pillar of the establishment. In the view of others, he is decent. He is upstanding. No doubt, in his own eyes, he is one of the good guys. If only there were more people like him in the world, frankly, it would be a better place.

[15:48] He compares himself with how he stands with others. I am not a director of Carillion. I am not a serial rapist like John Warboys. I am certainly not a sinner like that woman.

But of course, he never seriously stops to ask the question about how he stands in relation to God.

As for the woman, well, perhaps she doubts she would even be welcome in a church like Grace Church Dulwich.

So painfully is she aware of her sin, her moral debt to God. Like King David in Psalm 51, have mercy on me, O God.

Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin. My sin is ever before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. A deep shame before God.

[17:06] But it's more than shame. It's a deep sense of personal guilt, objective guilt before a holy God. objective guilt before a just God.

What is it that Jesus has to her? Verse 47, I tell you, her sins which are many are forgiven. Her sins were many. She knew that.

Simon knew that. Everyone knew that. But it's not of course as if this woman is a sinner and Simon is not.

Because they both are. It's just they think very differently about themselves. She knows she is not right with God but he is either blind to it or thinks he can pay his way with God.

And therefore of course he is blind to his need for forgiveness. Sadly, I take it it's why so many people today think the message of Jesus is irrelevant and as a result have so little interest in him.

[18:22] It's certainly not because of a lack of evidence of who Jesus is and the salvation he brings. We've seen that over the last two weeks. Rather, it's because of course people are convinced that they are decent and upright or decent and upright enough.

And so when they hear the message of salvation, they hear the message of the forgiveness Jesus brings, the call to follow him, and to them it either sounds irrelevant or it just sounds as if it's taking religion too seriously.

In other words, they have a big view of themselves and a small view of Jesus. So that's the first contrast, the first reason why people can think so differently and respond so differently to Jesus.

They think very differently about themselves. But secondly, they think very differently about Jesus because her extravagant devotion to Jesus, why it's such a contrast, isn't it, to the way in which Simon treats Jesus.

He doesn't even show common courtesy. Verse 44. Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, do you see this woman?

[19:38] I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet, but she had wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet.

You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. And who has he humiliated? Well, we've seen in Luke's account of Jesus, he's the king of kings, the lord of lords, the one promised for centuries, announced by angels, hailed by John the Baptist, the one who heals the sick, the one who raises the dead, indeed the one who will usher in a whole new creation at the end of time.

And so 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.

Now I think we need to be a little bit careful with verse 47, just have a look at it again. Notice Jesus is not saying, he is not saying that she has been forgiven because she loved him.

Rather, that her love for Jesus is the evidence that she has already been forgiven. Just as yesterday morning, you might have opened your curtains and said to yourself, it must be raining today because the windows are wet.

[21:05] Now the fact that the windows are wet doesn't cause it to be raining, rather they are the evidence that it means it is raining. After all, that's the way the story works, isn't it, in verses 41 and 42 and verse 43.

look again at the sequence. First, two men are forgiven their debts. Second, which will love more by way of response?

In the same way, her great love for Jesus is the response to the fact that she has been forgiven much. Now, we're not told when she first heard Jesus speaking.

We're not told that a back story, if you like, about when she received that forgiveness. But Luke summarizes it for us in verses 48 to 50.

He tells us all we need to know. Verse 48, he said to her, your sins are forgiven. Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, who is this who even forgives sins?

[22:12] And he said to the woman, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. How do you get forgiveness? Luke tells us, only Jesus can forgive sins.

John Chapman, the Australian evangelist, used to love telling the story of how on one occasion he took his clerical robes to the dry cleaners. And the lady behind the counter said to him, are you a priest?

And he said, you know that I am. She asked, well, what I want to know is, can you forgive my sins? He replied, no, not a hope.

She said, disappointed, no, that's what I thought too. To which he replied, but I know someone who can.

Great line, if ever you are, you get into that kind of conversation in the dry cleaners. by the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus is being crucified on a cross.

[23 : 19] He cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Isn't that an extraordinary thing? After all, isn't he the son of God? How can he be God forsaken?

The Bible tells us, Jesus, who was without sin, took the punishment that our sins deserve. so we can be completely forgiven and right with God just as this woman was.

It's why he says to her in verse 50, your faith has saved you. Notice it's not that she has a faith, you know, faith in anything, someone, something, somewhere.

No, she has faith in Jesus. She believes in him. She trusts in him. Her full confidence is in him.

And it's why she can now go in peace. Peace with God, her sins forgiven. November saw the inquest since the crash of a British tourist coach in the French Alps in April 2013.

[24 : 36] The coach had been descending a serious head in bends when the brakes failed. The driver, Morris Wrightson, could see the next bend ahead with a precipice over the edge. He knew the coach was going too fast.

And so, in an attempt to save as many lives as possible, he deliberately drove the coach into the mountainside, literally smashing himself into the rock face.

Christ, and he died. Now, I wonder how these survivors thought about him. As they thought of the danger they'd been in, it's no wonder, is it, that this woman, when later on she has the opportunity to thank Jesus, it's no wonder, is it, that she seizes it to demonstrate her gratitude her love, because it felt so good, so good to be forgiven, so good to be accepted.

And so, she risks all with this extravagant thank you. Verse 38, standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with a hair of her head.

Weeping, I guess tears of regret, regret over her sin, and yet no doubt tears of joy, and amazement, and relief, and wonder, and tears of thankfulness.

[26 : 25] Let me ask, as you look at the Lord Jesus dying on a cross, laying down his life, how do you respond? Does he win your love?

Do you know what it is to weep at Jesus' feet, as this woman wept at his feet? Do you know what it is to show him costly, unashamed love, as she does?

Regardless of what others think, let them mock, let them scorn, let them roll their eyes. This woman, she is completely overwhelmed by the wonder of forgiveness.

Surely, how much more us who know what it costs? Well, let me finish by addressing two groups of people.

First of all, those here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, we are delighted you're here, and perhaps especially this morning because this passage in Luke's Gospel takes us to the very heart of what a genuine response to Jesus looks like.

[27 : 43] It explains the dynamic, if you like, that is at the very heart of Christian discipleship. Not a dull drudgery, not earning salvation, not a fearful uncertainty about forgiveness, but instead a confidence, a certainty about the forgiveness of sins for anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ.

Which means, of course, that at the very heart of genuine discipleship is a great love for Jesus, a love that is public, devoted, sacrificial, shameless, extravagant, unselfconscious.

Whereas if you are like Simon the Pharisee, and you think you're a decent person, if you think you can pay your debts with God, that is never going to change you, is it?

At least not for the better. You'll either resent God, and you'll want nothing to do with him, or you will sink under the burden of your guilt.

But once you have grasped the forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers is free, it changes everything. A love for Jesus is extravagant, sacrificial, devoted.

[29 : 06] do talk to me afterwards if you'd like to know how to receive this forgiveness of sins for yourself. The second group of people are those who, well I guess we might regard them, and they might regard themselves as disciples of Jesus, but notice what's the question Luke really wants us to ask?

It's not so much is it, are you a disciple of Jesus? It's not so much are you a believer in Jesus? It's are you a lover of Jesus?

Jesus. That is the fruit Jesus looks for, not because he's desperate to be loved, but because it's appropriate, because there's something healthy about it. There's something wrong if we don't. Remember the first commandment, love the Lord your God? Remember the question of the risen Jesus to the apostle Peter, do you love me? Remember the warning in Revelation to the church in Ephesus, you have lost your first love?

In other words, Jesus is saying our spiritual state is revealed by our devotion to Jesus. Our spiritual state is revealed by our devotion to Jesus, a devotion that is expressed in sacrificial service of him. [30 : 37] God will do you I don't know about you, but it makes me think. Perhaps there are some here and Jesus would say a very similar thing to what he says to Simon in verses 44 to 46.

Do you see this woman? Do you see what she's done? And yet you barely give me the time of day. Your discipleship, if it can be called that, is cold, formal, begrudging, it never goes beyond your comfort zone, you serve at your convenience, it rarely costs you anything.

Perhaps some of us when we began the Christian life several years ago, perhaps indeed we were like this woman, a love of Jesus, serving him in a way that was indeed costly, public, shameless, extravagant, even in the face of being sneered at and dismissed by others.

But to be honest, you are now more like Simon. You're okay on a Sunday, but in your heart, there's no real devotion to Jesus Christ.

I guess there'll be others amongst us, and actually we do love Jesus, and our service of him is costly, it is sacrificial, it is uncomplaining, and perhaps others do sneer at us, or tell us that we are taking our faith far too seriously.

[32 : 09] In which case, be encouraged, because that is the sign of spiritual health that Jesus looks for. As for me, because I'm not going to ask you a question that I'm not prepared to answer myself, love, my answer, I think, is that I love Jesus somewhat.

But of course, I want to love him more. I long to love him more. And if you are like me, then Jesus says the key 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.

It is to see my sin for what it is, how much I've been forgiven, to see the love of Jesus for the unlovely, dying in my place for my sin.

Not as a sort of box to be ticked. Yes, you know, I understand that, tick the box. But as something which is completely life-transforming. Why don't we spend some time, perhaps longer than usual, in quiet reflection, and then I shall lead us in prayer.

[33 : 39] Your faith has saved you, go in peace. Heavenly Father, we praise you for these wonderful words declared by the Lord Jesus. We praise you that we know far more than that woman knew.

We thank you for his death on the cross for our sins, paid in full. We praise you for his great compassion. And we pray, Heavenly Father, these things wouldn't simply be things which we would, in a sense, believe in a kind of box-ticking kind of way, but perhaps in a sense not really believing.

We pray that we would believe them in a way in which we are transformed. We pray and long for a deep devotion to the Lord Jesus, a great love for him, that issues in service of him, that is public, extravagant, shameless, sacrificial, devoted, and we ask it in his name.

Amen.