

Religious Moderates vs Extremists

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[0 : 00] Here's something about religion. When it comes to practicing religion, good religion is moderate and bad religion is extreme. That's the rule that religions are allowed to operate in in Melbourne.

In our city, we can't push our views on other people. And so what's best is a moderate approach where I am right and you are right. We're all right in our own ways.

That way, religion won't stop us getting along. The other side of the coin, the last thing we want is religious extremism. The term extremist is very loaded in our culture.

Let's play a quick game of word association. So I say extremist, you say terrorist, that sort of thing. That's right. Well done. We don't want Melbourne to be full of religious extremists, do we?

Where we all disagree on fundamental issues. Where we don't agree that all paths are equally valid ways to God. Where you tell me I'm wrong, I tell you you're wrong.

[1 : 05] Because extremist positions lead to everything from the Crusades and racism to ISIS and, of course, suicide bombers. Good religion is moderate.

Bad religion is extreme. But to find out what God thinks, we come to a passage where Jesus meets a moderate and an extremist.

Now, if you please keep your hand out there, it'll tell you where we're going and your Bible's open. We're at point one. We're going to look at the moderate. Now, like many of you, perhaps, I personally identify with the moderate.

So I grew up in an Anglican church in Camberwell. We attended every week. We said grace with our dinner and prayers before bed. We tried to be good and not bad. Nice and moderate.

Nothing wrong with that. But as we look at this passage, you might be surprised what Jesus thinks. Because he's invited to eat dinner with a moderate.

[2 : 02] A Pharisee. In verse 40, we learn that his name is Simon. Now, the fact that Simon is a Pharisee mustn't make us think he's some cartoon or pantomime villain.

You know, pantomimes, where is he? Behind you. Where? Behind, you know, pantomime villains. We mustn't make, we mustn't think that a Pharisee is a villain. In their culture, they were good, observant Jews.

Morally upright. Very devout. In verse 40, he calls Jesus teacher. Which is a term of respect. They tried to live by the rules of their religion.

If you lived next to Simon, he would be a kind and generous neighbor. If you'd invited Simon to our Christmas services last month, he would have said yes. He's probably been observing Jesus from a distance and now he wants to find out more.

And so he invites him to be the guest of honor at a banquet. That is Simon the moderate. Let's look at the extremist. Point two. Verse 37.

[3 : 03] A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house. I take it as Luke is compiling his eyewitness account that all the eyewitnesses knew exactly who she was.

And their verdict? That she had lived a sinful life. The commentators, they speculate that she was the local prostitute. I'm not sure if that's true. But what we do know is that she had lived a sinful life. In fact, even Jesus himself says in verse 47 that her sins were many. And so you can imagine the shock when she crashes the dinner party.

Much like today if the local drug dealer turned up for breakfast. And as she comes in, she behaves like a mad person. And Luke slows the dinner party down to describe her every action.

Verse 37. She came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. This was the kind of ointment used for burials. It was very expensive and so had to be kept in an alabaster stone jar.

[4 : 12] Verse 38. As she stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Now, I don't cry almost ever. Because, anyway, I don't cry that much.

But if I did, I don't think I could cry that much that I could wet feet with my tears. The word used here is the same one for a rain shower.

She downpours tears on Jesus' feet. Commercial quantities of tears. She's clearly overcome, isn't she? Clearly overcome with emotion.

It goes on. Then she wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. I used to live in East London, which is very Middle Eastern. It looks like the Middle East.

And all the moderate religious women there were head coverings. Every one of them without fail. But our woman unravels her hair and wipes Jesus' feet with them.

[5 : 10] Back then, hot deserts, no sealed roads, sandals, not shoes. Who knows how many centuries till someone invents socks. Camels and donkeys, they're the Toyota Corollas of the time.

And so their mess is everywhere. But this says that the woman kissed Jesus' feet. Now, he's unwashed feet in a climate like that.

And all this is happening while poor old Simon is trying to keep the dinner conversation going. I don't know what the strangest thing you've ever seen at a dinner party is.

I was away with my wife's family last week in Tasmania. And one night we decided to eat without cutlery and without plates and without pots and pans. I think, Barry, I think there's a photo of it.

There it is. We all ate off the table with our hands. We hooked banana leaves down. The rice was served on the actual table with the stuff on top of it. And we just ate with our hands.

[6 : 08] My pop didn't really... I don't know if you can see him. He's not very happy there. It wasn't his... The kids loved it. But my pop didn't like it so much. Thanks, Barry. Have you ever been to a dinner party where they served food like that?

Yes? No? Have you ever been to a dinner party where the host accidentally burnt the food? Or it fell over before it reached the table? Have you ever been to a dinner party where a husband and wife had a public row in front of everyone?

Well, once Jesus went to a dinner party and a crazy sinful lady broke in and wet his feet with her tears and wiped his feet with her hair.

In verse 39, moderate Simon has had enough. If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman is, what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner.

You see, he wanted to learn more about Jesus, but his religious mind cannot understand how can a holy prophet allow this sinful woman to get near him, let alone touch him the way she does.

[7 : 20] The irony, of course, is that Jesus is a prophet and he reads Simon's mind and he answers him with a story. And this is our third point. Verse 40.

Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher. Two people owed money to a certain money lender. One owed him 500 denarii and 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? One denarii is a day's wages, as the footnote on your Bible says.

And perhaps not to speculate in a room this powerful, but let's call it \$300. So I did an equation on your handout. So 500 denarii, 500 days wages, call it \$150,000.

50 denarii, 50 days wages, about \$15,000. It is your mortgage versus your credit card or your mortgage versus a student loan. But verse 42 says, Neither of them had the money to pay him back.

[8 : 25] And in their world, this isn't an awkward conversation with the bank manager or bankruptcy. In their world, this means prison or slavery. Sell yourself or your family members into slavery until you pay the money back.

Extreme stuff. But then in verse 42, something that has never happened in their world or ours.

Verse 42. So he forgave the debts of both.

Can you imagine if the ANZ rings you up and says, Oh, we forgot to send you a Christmas present last month. So, you know, that crushing mortgage of yours.

Why don't we just forget the whole thing? Have you ever had a fantasy like that? But this is a story with teeth. Because this is a story about Simon.

And you can see that at the end of verse 42. Now, which of them will love him more? Simon sees it's about him. And so he grudgingly says, gives the correct answer.

[9 : 29] Verse 43. I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven. You have judged correctly. You see, Jesus contrasts an extreme woman with moderate Simon to expose what Simon's religious heart is really like.

He's trying to teach him the love principle. The person with the bigger debt cancelled loves more. Greater debt cancelled, greater love. That's the principle. The sinful woman, she's not mad.

She's madly in love because of what Jesus has done in her life. How much would you love me if I paid your crushing mortgage?

Would you give me a hug? Would there be tears of joy? Let me illustrate this more accurately as a rescue. A few years ago in 2014, there was an American soldier, American journalist named James Foley.

James was abducted by ISIS, some extremists. And then later they beheaded him. I learned that he'd actually been held prisoner for two years since 2012.

[10 : 40] And when I read it, I straight away thought of his mum. Because my mum has three sons. And I know how mums are with sons. And also my wife, Rachel. She is the mother of a son as well.

And so I thought about poor Mrs. Foley. The poor mum. Two years, her son, missing, captured. And then they did that terrible thing to him. But just imagine if you can, if the US Special Forces, they broke in somehow.

And they grabbed James and they rescued him. And they took him back and gave him back to his mum. How much love would Mrs. Foley have for the soldiers?

How many hugs and tears would there be? It would look like madness to someone who didn't know the story. The same thing is going on in the dinner party.

Here is a woman, an extremist, if ever there was one. She breaks in. She kisses dirty feet. She washes them with tears and hair. Yet the scene is wildly over the top.

[11 : 44] Because she loves Jesus with all her heart. And all her soul. And all her mind. And all her strength. She responds to his amazing grace.

That saved a wretch like her. But all Simon sees is a mad woman. For us today, do you think the woman is wild and extreme?

If we don't understand her behaviour, do we really love Jesus and know what he's on about? Do we really understand who he is?

In verse 49, the other guests, who is this who even forgives sins? They had no idea who he was.

And Simon is so upset because he has no idea that her many sins have now been forgiven.

And so Jesus walks him through the love principle. Look at verse 44. He turned toward the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman?

[12 : 45] I came into your house. You didn't give me any water for my feet. Common courtesy in their culture. But she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You did not give me a kiss. That's not over the top. That was just as polite as a handshake. But this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.

You did not put oil on my head. Again, just polite courtesy for the guest in your house. But she has poured perfume on my feet. In this story, Jesus allows Simon the smaller debt.

He offers his debt cancelled, just like the woman. But he doesn't love Jesus at all. You see, Simon has a transactional relationship with God.

Just like I have with my doctor. My doctor does a good job. I respect him, but I don't love him. He gives me the pills. I give him the cash.

[13 : 43] A transactional relationship. He does his job. I do mine. Most people have that sort of relationship with God. God does his job, whatever that is. And we do ours.

Just being good, moderate, religious people. Simon looks at this woman and he doesn't understand her. Because he has no idea that he has a debt too.

And more importantly, the sting in the tail that neither of them can pay their debts. In this story, Jesus allows Simon a smaller debt by a factor of 10.

But the sting is that neither of them can pay. You see, religion has done all it can for Simon. It has created a distance between him and this sinful woman.

It's made him look good compared to her. But it didn't help him recognize who God was, even when he turned up for dinner.

[14 : 40] If being better than other people makes Simon think he'll be okay with God, he's in big trouble. Because Jesus wants to say the issue isn't the size of the debt per se, but that neither of

them can repay it.

See, people think they're good based on a comparison with the person next to them. Imagine if I said to you, I'm a better husband than my friend Ben, because Ben, he's always unfaithful to his wife.

Whereas I'm only sometimes unfaithful to mine. And then what if I said, well, to my wife, it's okay, darling, where I'm unfaithful, because here are some flowers.

Does that make up for it? Because we always do that with God. Big or small, we all have a debt. That's not the issue today. The issue is that no amount of religious performance can erase it. And Jesus doesn't want, he doesn't need the tears and the extreme emotion per se.

[15:58] But just a recognition of how much we need his rescue. And so he tells this story to Simon to shock him out of his complacency, to teach him what God is really like.

You see, in our city, the nicest thing you can say about a religious person is that they are a moderate, that they've got their religion under their control. But Jesus won't be under our control. He doesn't fit in our pockets. This story is about Simon and for people who are confused about who Jesus is, who think moderate religion is good enough for God.

But we're going to finish by looking at the woman and for people who identify with her. Verse 48. Jesus said to the woman, your sins are forgiven.

It's amazing. He forgives the extremist and rebukes the moderate. Because Jesus is nothing like religious people. He's not about looking down on this woman.

[16:59] He's about forgiveness. It required great courage for her to enter the house that day. You'll need great courage to ask Jesus for forgiveness. But you can be certain what the response will be.

Verse 50. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Whether you owe Jesus 50 or 500, no matter what you have done in your life, the size of the debt isn't the problem for Jesus.

You can't say that you're too bad for him. His death pays it all. And like the woman, that should lead to maybe extremism is the wrong word.

Maybe wholehearted devotion is the right word instead. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven as her great love has shown.

We've been applying this passage the whole way through, changing our ideas as we've been going along. But I just want to finish with a couple of reflections. Lately here at the church, I've been feeling a little bit awkward, socially awkward, because a lot of our sermons, well, mine mainly, they always come around to talking about sin.

[18:14] And I sort of feel that's a bit intense. But this passage says that that is okay. Because unless you feel the crushing weight of a mortgage or the dread of being on death row, you won't love the rescue.

Unless you feel weighed down by sin, by how perilous it is to face God without forgiveness, you won't love Jesus and his rescue.

Reflecting on sin will feel crushing at times. But it is essential for you to love Jesus. I have young children. Some of you do.

Lots of you have young grandchildren. I'm supposed to pray that my children would marry godly Christians. That's a really excellent prayer, by the way. But I don't often pray that.

Because I spend all my time praying that my kids would love Jesus more than I do. And so I talk to my kids about sin. It's amazing what they can comprehend.

[19:16] I want to nurture their relationship with God. I want them to love Jesus more than I do. And so I talk to them about sin. Why don't our family and friends love Jesus?

Because they don't think they have a debt of sin. Or if they do, they don't think they need Jesus' forgiveness. They can work it off like Simon with a bit of religious performance.

Whoever has been forgiven little loves little. January is the time for New Year's resolutions. I don't know how you feel about New Year's resolutions. But here is a good one.

Why don't you resolve this year to recognize how extreme your sin is. To recognize how extreme it would be to face God without Jesus.

So that it would lead to a wholehearted love and devotion to Him. If your love for Jesus grew just 5% in 2020, that would be an incredible year in your walk with the Lord.

[20:22] Verse 47. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little. Let's pray.

Father God, we honor and adore you, our great and mighty Lord. We sing our songs of praises that songs cannot repay.

Father God, thank you that you teach us your word. Thank you that you tell us the truth. That we cannot pay our debt of sin back.

Please would we reflect on this. So that we would love Jesus with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength. Please would we never get over how He saved wretches like us. And His amazing grace to us. Please Father, would we teach other generations about sin. Would we tell them what Jesus has done in our lives.

[21 : 20] So that they would love Him more than we do. And we ask this in His name and for His glory. Amen.