

# What Religion Is All About

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're looking at Luke chapter 7 and verse 37, and we're beginning tonight a series of sermons from the Gospel according to St. Luke, and it's all to do with meals, where people were gathered around a table or enjoying the hospitality one of another.

And this seems to be a characteristic of Luke's Gospel, and I think wisely so. And so this is the first of them, and next week we're going to talk about the man who took the fellow to a hotel and looked after him there, and following that, the story of Martha and Mary.

And so the series will go, and during the period between now and Easter, we'll be covering the various occasions in which people met together for a meal in the Gospel according to St. Luke. And if you want to follow the series, they're all printed up for you on a little green card, and you can have one of those from the table as you leave. And if there's not one there, we'll try and get you one through the coffee yard.

Luke's Gospel, well, Luke, as you know, wrote both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

[ 1 : 37 ] And someone has said that Luke's Gospel is possibly, they didn't say possibly, I'm adding possibly, they said it categorically, the most beautiful book in the English language.

And so that there is a sense in which anybody who moves in to preach about Luke's Gospel is desecrating holy ground. You might, in fact, be better just to read it, but God has ordained through the foolishness of this process of preaching that things might, by God's grace, be brought to our hearts, which otherwise we wouldn't hear.

We might get involved totally in the matter of aesthetics and be able to gloss over the striking content of this passage.

And it's a most wonderful passage because it deals with, really, the whole heart of what religion is all about. If you look at it, following it in chapter 7, verse 37, you'll find that it deals in the first instance with religion.

Religion, as it becomes so integrated with the cultures in which we live, and so much a part of the background of our lives. I listened to that Cross Canada Roundup or something this afternoon.

[ 3 : 06 ] Did you hear that on the subject of abortion? And some of the religious types that got on there made my hair curl. It was just awful. The statements they made and claimed for it the authority of God.

It was dreadful. But religion very often is a dreadful thing in our society. It's a terrible distortion. And lots of people see it only as a terrible distortion and never see through it. But this story tonight is designed almost so that you will see through the terrible distortion of religion to the wonderful reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The distortion, I think, is well represented by Simon the Pharisee, who out of idle curiosity, I think, perhaps not so idle, but maybe pervasive curiosity, thought it would be a clever thing that you will see through the Bible.

And he was trying to do to invite the man, Jesus, to his home for a meal. And he gathered some of his friends together, as we learn, and Jesus came to eat with them.

[ 4 : 21 ] It was almost like he had a kind of prize religious specimen on display and invited his friends to come.

And they met perhaps in the open courtyard of his house, and there was access to the street. And in from the street came a woman. And as they were sitting at table, this woman knelt at the feet of the Lord Jesus.

And weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, wipe them with the hair of her head, kissed his feet, and anointed them with ointment.

And the loveliness of what she did, and the cold, barren formality of what the Pharisee had done, I think is the contrast that I want you to see.

And it's my heart's desire that you would associate the gospel with the loveliness of what was done by this woman out of her love for the Lord Jesus. And understand that that's very much more the heart of the Christian faith than all the formalities of the Phariseeism, which most of us equate with religion, and most of us define religion in those terms.

[ 5 : 56 ] Pharisee expresses the indignation which most religious people feel. And I'm using religious in a derogatory sense, and I know there's a positive sense for it too.

But most people at this time in our history regard religion in a very derogatory way. And they're given some affirmation of this, some reason to feel this, if you were to look at the Pharisee. The Pharisee who had invited him saw what was taking place and was no doubt embarrassed. But then he thought in terms of the Lord Jesus and said about the Lord Jesus, 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.

And she was touching him indeed, and her tears were flowing. And she washed his feet with her tears.

[ 7 : 03 ] When I first went into the ministry, I'm not very keen on touching things. You know, I don't, particularly things that are unpleasant, I don't like touching. And I can remember being called to a farmhouse, and there was a man who was in the last stages of terminal illness, lying in the bedroom in the farmhouse.

And his daughter was looking after him. And she left a completely unforgettable impression on my mind and heart, simply by the way she took her hands and touched this man who was, to my way of thinking, physically repulsive.

And the way she could take her hands and she could relate to him, and embrace him and kiss him, and had genuine compassion for something which I regarded as repulsive.

I couldn't, I had difficulty with it. And the sheer loveliness of what this woman did.

Her tears were undoubtedly very genuine tears. Her hair meant that her head was uncovered, which was a disgrace according to the customs of the day.

[ 8 : 32 ] The file of ointment was undoubtedly part of the equipment of her trade, for she was a harlot. And the perfume was something that she would use.

She took this and broke it and anointed Jesus' feet with it. And the host of the Lord Jesus became extremely embarrassed by this, and turned his embarrassment on her, on Jesus, by saying, you know, if he were a prophet, he'd know what was happening.

And it's terribly striking the way this story moves into an area that we don't know anything about.

We're so caught up in feminist roles and male roles and the sort of cultural values that have built around these various roles, and the total misunderstanding of human sexuality, which seems to have afflicted our society, that it's very difficult to look at this story, and the physical contact that's a part of it, and the tears, and the hair, and the ointment, and the obvious devotion which this woman had for Jesus, and the way she expressed that devotion in a very physical way.

And it's such an utterly beautiful thing for her to have done. I don't know how often you get invited out for supper, but I get invited out with Fran from time to time.

And it's a lovely thing to happen. Sometimes it's not so lovely, but most often it's very lovely indeed.

And the idea of coming into a home at 6 o'clock and being there until 11 or 12 o'clock at night and slowly sharing the home and sharing one another and sharing food together and drinking together and talking together and doing all those things that are part of that ritual, it's undoubtedly one of the most sophisticated rituals in our society.

[ 10 : 55 ] And one of the most profound things that we do to share a meal with somebody. And to be able to do it and to do it well is something which this Pharisee wasn't very good at.

It was very fortunate for him that Mary came along and in a sense brought to the occasion a love and an understanding which wasn't there previously.

But even in the course of a supper in these days, you learn a great deal about one another. You learn a great deal about people's relationships to one another.

You can pick up all sorts of things. You really have got to know someone over the sharing of a meal together. And I'm sure that's why in Luke's Gospel he records many instances which we're trying to trace in these sermons.

We're trying to trace what happens when people share a meal together. Why at the center of the whole of the Christian faith is the sharing of a meal together.

[12:11] How people get to know one another as they share a meal together. And to look at the implications of what happens when families stop sharing meals together.

When friends stop meeting together for an evening in which they share one with another. Because so much belongs to that in terms of the building of relationships between people.

And it's not really the grasp you have of gourmet cooking. But there's something else which is part of that meal which makes it a memorable experience.

This was undoubtedly a very memorable experience. Because of the genuine love which was displayed to everybody's surprise by a woman of the street who came in off the street and without embarrassment to herself but with acute embarrassment to everybody else who was there except I suspect the Lord Jesus.

She washed his feet with her tears wiped them with her hair put ointment on his feet Well, what it shows is probably as clearly as could be shown is what lies very much at the heart of Christian faith.

[13:48] And what lies at it is not the Phariseeism of Sinai and his sensitivity to social and cultural conventions and his formal and ungracious behavior towards his guests, the Lord Jesus.

That's not what faith consists of. What faith consists of is expressed by Mary Magdalene as she, in an uninhibited way expresses very profoundly her deep devotion to the person of the Lord Jesus through whom she had discovered, apparently that she was forgiven.

And the Pharisee couldn't understand this So Jesus took the trouble to explain to him and his friends what had taken place and by way of explaining it because so often we can understand with a story better than we can understand in any other way he told them this simple story A certain creditor had two debtors one owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty When they could not pay he forgave them both Now which of them loved him more?

And Simon answered The one I suppose to whom he forgave more He said to him You have judged rightly And so Simon understood the story perfectly without any clue at all of the application of it And so often we understand the stories of Jesus perfectly but need that God by his grace would help us make application to the circumstances of our own lives And Jesus goes on to take the story and from the story with which Simon had so readily agreed He then made application so that Simon could understand how it applied to him Jesus explained to him Do you see this woman?

I entered your house and you gave me no water for my feet She has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair You gave me no kiss as would have been the custom in that part of the world and at that time as indeed it is still the custom in that part of the world But from the time I came here Jesus said She has not ceased to kiss my feet You did not anointing my head with oil But she has anointed my feet with ointment Somehow though the Pharisee had every opportunity to plan and prepare and make room for the Lord Jesus in his home and beyond that perhaps in his heart he didn't do it and his religion remained a cold sterile supercilious kind of thing in which he considered himself to be vastly superior to his guest and infinitely superior to the woman of the street who would come into his house and that expresses almost perfectly the human tragedy is that sense of essential superiority which makes it very difficult for us to know how to respond because of our innate sense of superiority

[18:00] Jesus goes on to make application for Simon when he says I tell you her sins which are many are forgiven for she loved much he who is forgiven little loves little well you see what's at the heart of this is the recognition of our sinfulness recognition of our sinfulness which comes not because somebody comes and says this is what you owe me but because someone comes and says you're forgiven you are totally and unconditionally forgiven there is there is nothing which you owe even as the as the money lender said to these two he forgave them both one a great sum of money and one a little well the woman was deeply conscious of having been deeply forgiven and the man was not even barely conscious of a need to be forgiven strikes me as

I suppose one of the continuing enigmas of my life that that our human sexuality is capable of producing in us great joy and great satisfaction and great communion and communication and great guilt and sense of failure both in the extremes and I don't know why this harlot for indeed that's what she was had such a deep sense of having been forgiven but she did she was forgiven by Jesus Christ and you have to see that point very clearly because nobody else can forgive no one else is in the position to offer forgiveness he is the only one to give it he is the only one from whom we can receive and the wonder of this woman's experience was that she was deeply conscious of the

wonderful gift that had been given to her in her forgiveness and with her tears and with her kisses and with her hands and with her hair and with her ointment she gave expression of deep thankfulness for what

Jesus had done for her that she had been wonderfully and profoundly forgiven and that you see is the picture of what the heart of the Christian faith is forgiveness it's not a long and protracted series of religious events and exercises whereby we hope ultimately to earn the forgiveness of our sins but it is the understanding that having been forgiven with all that we have and all that we are we seek to give thanks to the one who has forgiven us and that's what it's all about that's what the basis of the relationship is and you see it's and I'm sure it's in the minds of the

Pharisees a highly immoral procedure it's very unfair and profoundly disturbing to most religious people that Jesus forgives someone who on no grounds whatever could claim forgiveness he forgives her freely well the guests around the table are disturbed and they don't know what to do and so they begin to say among themselves who is this who even forgives sins and that's a good question who is this who does it and you see the reality of it is that we can't imagine anybody doing it and let me tell you that the chief tyranny of your profession of faith is that you will become a Pharisee it happens to us all that's the human model of religion that we all gravitate towards in our own pride and sense of superiority my friend

Ernie told me the other day the terrible difficulty with helping an elderly lady across the street is that you can't help but feel virtuous for doing it and that ruins all that you've done and the terrible problem with religion is that when you do something like say a prayer or go to church you get a warm glow of essential superiority to your fellow man and suspect that that's what religion is all about what religion is all about is illustrated by the woman who with her tears with her hands with her hair with her ointment and without caring what anybody thinks expresses from her heart her deep love for the one through whom she is forgiven and so the story ends with Jesus not even bothering to answer the question he says to the woman your faith has saved you go in peace same thing words are translated your faith has made you well your faith has made you a whole person go in peace

[ 25 : 58 ] I hope that from that meal well I expected from that meal that she was the only one that did go in peace I hope the others went profoundly disturbed but I can assure you in Christ's name that you too are forgiven quite apart from who you are or what you are or what you've done the grounds of your forgiveness are clearly and unconditionally established you don't need to spend the rest of your life speculating on who has the right to forgive sins you are forgiven once you've come to realize that and to understand it then now your life is to be my life is to be a spontaneous declaration of our love for the one who has forgiven that's all your life has to be the other circumstances beyond that are incidental that's to be the central reality that's what belongs to you as you belong to

Jesus Christ as he has made known to you the forgiveness of your sins Amen