

Luke 7:36-50 - The Parable of the Two Debtors

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Date: 18 October 2015

Preacher: Guest: Reid Jones

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

It's always an honor to be able to worship with you all, and I think Will lied just now. I don't know if I'm the favorite. Maybe the most available, but favorite.

It's kind of a long shot. I know who y'all have had in the last couple months. I am not the favorite. I'm not my favorite. So I'm glad to be with y'all. Last time I was here, we were wrapping up year three on the campus.

Since then, we've begun year four. For me, the ministry is in its ninth year at UAH, and we are so thankful to be there. I just want to, while I have a chance, say thank you for the ways that you have cared for us and the way you've ministered to us, our family, since we've been here, and also to the campus and to the city.

We are so thankful for your ministry with us and your partnership. It's an honor to serve with you at UAH. The Lord's blessed in our work this semester. It's been so much fun meeting new students and seeing folks get involved, and thank you for being with us on that campus.

[1 : 13] We come this morning to Luke chapter 7. We're considering one of the parables that Jesus told in the context of a very interesting story. Luke chapter 7, beginning in verse 36.

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.

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.

And Jesus, answering, said to him, 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.

[2 : 23] When they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, The one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt.

He said to him, You have judged rightly. Then turning to the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house and 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 do 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. 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 among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you.

[3 : 27] Go in peace. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our Lord will stand forever. Would you pray with me for a moment? God, as we consider this passage, it's a hard passage, it's a heavy one, and it is a convicting one.

Would your spirit so move in this place that we see the accumulation of our own debt before you? That we see the one who can forgive that debt and how he makes the way possible?

I pray, Jesus, that you would be exalted through our time together, that you would humble us, you would encourage us, you would point us heavenward to see the gracious God who forgives sins.

I pray that you would, and we ask for Jesus' glory only. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. I came across an article not too long ago from the Wall Street Journal.

Not that I read that, but if I did, I did come across this article about student loan debt. It was pretty interesting to me because I work on the college campus.

[4 : 37] And the name of the article literally was, Congrats, Class of 2015. You're the most indebted ever. And it runs through the statistics of student loan rates on the college campus these days.

And I know we have a number of our students and probably other college students here this morning. So take note, the average student loan debt from last year's class was \$35,000. That's the average. And the article went on to say that 70% of the graduates graduated with debt. So, you know, 30% didn't, but 70% of last year's graduates incurred a lot of student debt. It was interesting to me. Kelly and I just paid off our student loans about a month ago. We just finally sent our final payment in, and we went to Troy. You know, it's pretty inexpensive. There's a lot of student debt out there.

We know something about debt as a culture. Kelly and I also, Kelly's my wife, she and I take a Financial Peace University class right now, just trying to understand money better and making a plan for our girls for college and those kind of things.

[5 : 41] And I'm learning in this Financial Peace University class, if you've ever listened to the Dave Ramsey show or taken this class, you know, at the end when people pay off their debt, there's that little ceremony that takes place in Nashville.

You know what I'm talking about? You've heard it on the radio. Maybe you've been to the studio where the people come on his show or they'll call in, and what is it that they scream? We're debt free!

And it's just this huge celebration. They're jumping up and down and crying and hugging, and there's people in the coffee shop clapping for them. And it's really exciting. Now, the student loan debt, we know something about that.

We know something about credit card debt and mortgages and car loans. And in this passage, there's a debt incurred. And in this passage, there's a celebration. Someone is screaming, I'm debt free, and it's not who you think it would be.

It's pretty interesting, the one who gets the debt and the one who doesn't in this passage. Here's the context. Jesus had just finished preaching, and he's going from town to town, preaching the message of the kingdom of God, and he's becoming pretty famous at this point, maybe even infamous.

[6 : 46] And there's some people who are responding to his message, very excited about what he has to say, and others who are very offended, especially those religious types, the Pharisees in this passage, because they believe that they're not really in that much debt to God.

They've done a pretty good job of maintaining kind of the status quo of spirituality. And this Jesus comes along, and they say, well, we don't murder. We don't commit adultery.

And Jesus comes along and says, you say you don't murder, but have you ever been angry in your heart that you've committed murder? You say you don't commit adultery, but have you ever lusted after a woman that you have committed adultery in your heart?

And they knew that the result for murder would be death, and the result for adultery would be stoning or something worse. And they thought, this guy has to be done away with. And so they would go in here and teach, hear him teach and figure out ways to trap him.

And so that's why the impromptu dinner party. This is nothing but a trap. The Pharisee says, hey, Jesus, would you like to come over to my house for lunch today?

[7 : 49] And Jesus accepts. He knows it's a trap, but he accepts the invitation. And he goes. Now, here's a little bit more context. They're sitting in this kind of room. There's a table, but they don't have chairs.

They're kind of leaning against the table. And this isn't like some house up on Montecino with a nice, fancy dining room. This is on the street side, really. And so Jesus would have been at the table with these very important people having this dinner, but there would be others who would just kind of come and watch because he's kind of famous at this point.

Well, as they're sitting at the table and kind of leaning out, and their feet on the outside of the table, this woman comes in, and she begins to go to Jesus' feet, and she starts crying.

And she breaks out this oil and begins washing her feet. She lets down her hair and wipes his feet with her hair. And everyone, you would be very uncomfortable, right? They were very uncomfortable.

The Pharisees were even offended, and you heard the guy kind of murmur under his breath, does this guy, he says he's a prophet. He doesn't even know who this woman is. And so Jesus says, I have a story to tell you.

[9:01] The way I want to kind of, that was my intro. Don't get too nervous or anything. We're not going to spend that much time on every point. But the way I've kind of got this outline is I want to go through the three questions that are asked in this passage.

There's three questions that are being asked. The first two are by Jesus. And he goes on and tells this story, and he asks a question at the end of it. And the question is, which will love more?

The parable again, in verse 41, very short parable Jesus tells, a certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed 500 denarii and the other 50.

When they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both. Now, which of them will love more? So in this parable, there's a certain moneylender who had a couple people who owed him debt.

Now, kind of to bring it in modern terms, the first would have owed about two months' worth of wages and the other about 20 months' worth of wages. So you have significant debt for both, both a debt that can't easily be repaid, the first two months and then maybe kind of a year and a half worth of debt.

[10:04] It's a really simple story to make a couple of interpretive points early on. One is this. Jesus is clearly teaching that all of us are in debt to God. And that's the point he's going to get at here.

But all of us are in debt to God. Now, the point is, all of us are in debt to God. Everyone owes God something. And the way that he's made us, he's called us to perfection.

We are created in God's image. And what we owe him in order to maintain a relationship with him is a perfect union. And so every time and in every way that we have continually sinned against God in any way, we have accumulated debt before God.

We can run this down. You may feel that yours is only two months' worth or maybe you feel it's 18 months' worth or 20 or more. But even if we run down our own list of debt from today only, just using, Jesus said, the greatest commandment is love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Let's just think about it today. In the last four hours of today, has there been a moment where we have not loved the Lord our God with all of our heart? Has there been that moment like there was in my house this morning, the Sunday morning rush?

[11:24] You know it? And I get upset and angry that everyone's not, I was not loving my family. I was not loving God with all of my heart. Have you had those moments even today?

What about with all of your strength? Has there been even a moment where you haven't done all that you could do for the Lord today? With all of your mind, has your mind wandered?

Have you gone to your mini to-do list? Have you already kind of given yourself to fears and anxieties this morning? You see how this works. If we just start going through the list, the debt is stacked against us even in a few hours.

Then the second commandment, love your neighbor as yourself. Do we even need to begin running it down? The point is Jesus is saying, everyone, everyone owes a debt to God and it's more than any of us can pay.

So Jesus asks the Pharisee this question, which of the two who are forgiven of their debt will love him more? And the guy answers correctly, the one I suppose for whom he canceled the larger debt.

[12:28] That's the right question. That's the right answer to the question, but he doesn't get it. That's right. The one who understands the significance of their debt will love the one who forgave their debt even more.

That's right. But he doesn't get it. And so Jesus asks a second question. Do you see this woman? Now this is about to get really hard for Simon, this Pharisee, and it's going to get uncomfortable for us because there's this woman who's in the room.

Most scholars kind of agree that this woman wasn't just some woman. This is a woman who was very reputable in the community, a lady of the night to put it delicately.

Many would say that she has kind of given of herself to many in that community in all the wrong ways and she is coming into this room, bringing all of her guilt and all of her shame and going into a place that would be extremely, you think they were uncomfortable.

She would have had to be terribly uncomfortable to walk into this room with all these religious types and to lay down at Jesus' feet as if to say it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what they think, but she lays down at Jesus' feet and she begins to weep.

[13:44] Why? What is going on with this woman? Something within her has changed. Now this is total speculation, but I wonder if she had just heard Jesus teach.

I don't know how long it was before this passage that Jesus gave the Beatitudes. There's only a chapter before ours in this book, but when Jesus said things like, blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God, and blessed are the hungry, now for you will be fulfilled.

And he said, blessed are you who weep, for you will laugh. And I wonder if she saw herself as poor. Poor in probably actual poverty, which is probably why she ended up in the position that she did.

Poor in spirit. Poor in her shame because of her regular giving of herself over and over again. And hating that part about herself. Feeling outcast and low and full of guilt and self-hatred and fear.

And she hears, blessed are you who are poor. For yours is the kingdom of God. Maybe she heard, blessed are you who are hungry.

[15:03] And she saw herself as hungry. She knew she wasn't satisfied with what her life had offered her. She knew that this felt like it was not giving her any kind of purpose or hope, her joy or peace of any kind.

And she heard Jesus say, blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be satisfied. And she heard Jesus say, blessed are you who weep. And she wept. She wept literally in this passage and she wanted to laugh.

And so she found Jesus. She found him. She came to him. And she poured out her oil and she let down her hair. Two things, by the way, that she would have only done in the most dark moments of her life previously.

And she laid down all of who she was at the feet of Jesus. And she just cried and it didn't matter who saw it.

Because now she felt safe for the first time. And so Jesus turns to Simon and he says, do you see this woman? She got it.

[16:17] The Pharisee missed it. The prostitute got it. She knew she owed more than 20 months worth of wages. And so she loved forgiveness so much more.

Because she understood the cost. Jesus goes on to start laying out the contrast to Simon to make it even more clear. To show that the religious one is the one who missed but the sinner is the one who's getting it right.

And he gives these contrasts. He says, you didn't even give me water. Which would have been a custom of the day to wash his feet with. But she began to wet my feet with her tears.

You didn't give me a kiss when I arrived. Which of course was another custom of the day. But she began to kiss my feet. You, Pharisee, didn't anoint my head with oil.

but she broke open her oil and poured it on my feet. There's one person in the room who got it and the others who didn't.

[17:26] I came across this quote from Lewis, C.S. Lewis this week from Mere Christianity when he says, the sins of the flesh are bad but they are the least bad of all sins.

All the worst pleasures are spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong. Of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport and backbiting.

The pleasures of power. The pleasures of hatred. There are two things inside me competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the animal self and the diabolical self.

The diabolical self is the worst of the two. Listen to this quote. He says, this is why a cold self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.

But of course it is better to be neither. He adds. Is that not exactly the picture of what this passage is showing us? The self-righteous one misses it.

[18:30] And so that's when Jesus makes his big point. Therefore I tell you her sins which are many are forgiven for she loved much but he who is forgiven little loves little and he turns to her and he says your sins are forgiven.

Who will love more? The one who understands the cost of what it took to cancel their debt. And so that leads to the final question. This one was not asked by Jesus though.

In verse 49 they begin to say among themselves who is this who even forgives sins? Now that is the question right?

That not just the question of this passage that is the question. Who is this? That's the question for the last at least 2,000 years.

The question that has started wars. The question that has divided families. The question that has redirected careers.

[19 : 36] That is the question. Who is this? It's a really good question and if we start to see the answer that's kind of given in this passage the way we understand our own debt begins to change.

Because here's the premise behind the question. It isn't just who is this guy but it is who is this guy who can forgive sins? Because they know and we know that there's only one who can forgive sins. It's the one whom all sins are against. Let me illustrate it a couple ways. In Jesus' parable who is the one person in the parable he tells who can forgive the debt of those two?

It is the one who gave them the money. Right? Someone else can't come along and say don't worry about it your debt is forgiven. No. The one who the debt is against is the only one who can forgive. Now let me illustrate it in a very silly way. The only way I know to illustrate anything. Say I let you borrow my new computer and I have a fairly new computer and it's really nice and I like it a lot and I would never let you borrow it.

[20 : 53] But say I did and you're just going to borrow it here after church today I just need it for the afternoon we can get together later and pick it back up and I pretend to be nice and yeah yeah yeah you can borrow it no worries.

And you set it on top of your car and you're kind of fumbling around and get your kids in the car and then you get in the car and you start pulling out of the parking lot and then there goes my computer and it bursts into a million pieces in Southwood's parking lot and I'm over here weeping in the corner.

But say in that scenario there's a couple of little points to make here right? Say someone else Will for instance comes alongside you and says hey don't worry about it I forgive you.

It doesn't work forgiveness doesn't work like that. There's only one person in that silly illustration who can forgive you for breaking my computer it's me. The one whom the problem is against is the only one who can forgive.

Does that make sense? Very simple. Now the second point to make is forgiveness is not arbitrary. Someone has to pay the cost either way.

[22 : 02] It's either you or it's me. I love the line if any of you ever watched The Office before it was taken away from all of us when Michael Scott learns of the great debt that he's in the bankruptcy episode you know this one and Toby tells him that there's really only one way to get out of this debt it is to declare bankruptcy and he walks out of his office and he looks around the office and kind of takes it all in and then he goes I declare bankruptcy and everyone's just looking at him and Toby says you can't just declare it that's not how debt is forgiven someone has to take the debt on in order for debt to be cancelled so in the situation of forgiveness who is the one who takes the debt on it's the one offering forgiveness this is why forgiveness is hard by the way in relationships in marriage with kids on the campus with students roommates like forgiveness is very difficult for us because you know why it's saying

I will set you free from the debt you owe me for the thing that you done and I'm going to take that on myself and not hold it over you anymore that's why forgiveness is hard because it is costly to us that's a whole nother sermon but it's so difficult so who is this who can forgive sins you know what the answer simply has to be the one whom sins are against this Jesus has to be God that's the only thing that makes sense and so that means if your sins and my sins are stacked and they are accumulated and our debt is against us and it is against a holy God then there's one who's come along and says your sins are forgiven how can Jesus forgive sins there's only one way by taking the debt on himself forgiveness is not arbitrary someone has to pay this semester as we've gone through various parables in RUF

I've kind of been working this theme with our students another Lewis reference when he says that there's only one way that Hamlet can ever interact with Shakespeare he says if Hamlet wants to get to know Shakespeare you know Hamlet's the character Shakespeare is the playwright he said if Hamlet ever wants to get to know Shakespeare it's only if Shakespeare writes himself into the story

and I take parables to be God writing himself into the story and I think a key way to interpret and understand parables is to look to where the storyteller inserts himself into the story it doesn't work that way every time but here we have Shakespeare writing himself into the play where is Jesus he's the money lender the only way he can forgive the debt is taking it on himself so how does Jesus take the debt on himself it's where the cross stands in history isn't it scripture tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins we also learn in the New

Testament that the wages of our sin is death that means the only way debt is ever cancelled is if someone dies for it if someone sheds their blood for it it's the only way debt cancellation isn't just declared it is absorbed and so Jesus takes on our debt on himself he takes on the wages of our sins when he takes on the cross so that paid in full is written the cross our eternities forever it's the only way our sins are forgiven and so when Jesus says blessed are the poor and blessed are the hungry and blessed are those who weep we have to see that Jesus says that because Jesus became poor so that we would be satisfied he left the riches and comforts of heaven came into earth gave it all became poor in his poverty so that we might become rich in him it's the only way riches are offered

Jesus became hungry he went into this world hungry for hope and for peace and for purpose in life all of these things that we are hungry for he became hungry for on our behalf so that we might be fulfilled and satisfied in him Jesus said blessed are those who weep and Jesus wept he did he wept at the reality of death when his friend Lazarus died he sweated blood in the garden no doubt tears were on his face when he took the nails Jesus wept so that you who weep over your sin and brokenness you who weep over the hardships that this world offers us on a daily basis over the relationship strains and struggles over the insecurities and fears over the perpetual sins that we just can't seem to get rid of you who weep will laugh with him in his glory that is the hope that Jesus offers us

[27 : 54] I think it's so ironic that at the beginning of the story the Pharisee is murmuring who is this guy thinks he's a prophet and at the very end they're saying who is this guy who even forgives sins I want to close with three questions for you and for me too the first is this do you know this man do you know this Jesus I'm convinced that there are two types of people in this passage those who say God owes me something and those who know they owe everything to him Lewis called it the Pharisee the self righteous one and the prostitute one of them gets who this

Jesus is and what they have done for him and the other misses it completely do you see him do you know him do you see yourself as poor as hungry you may say that you know I'm yeah I know him I'm here every week you're the guest like I'm always here I go to the programs I do the Bible studies I'm I know him I get it I believe many of the Pharisees would have said the same thing they say I get it and they felt that God owed him something do you know him in the way that this woman does the second question is this maybe you do say I do know him I have a relationship with God the question is how are you responding to what he has done for you this all the stuff that this woman did in this passage this was no small act of kindness this for her was costly worship to lay down at the feet of Jesus to pour out her perfume to let down her hair she risked many things in this story I've mentioned shame a number of times already she was willing to lay down her shame at the feet of Jesus she was willing to risk her reputation she knew people knew who she was and she was willing to go anyway there was even a financial risk here pouring out this perfume how are you responding to what Jesus has done what is he asking you to risk for him that you are just not willing it could be a lot of the same things right maybe he's asking you to lay down your shame too to have that awfully hard conversation about those things that you struggle with that no one you don't want them to know could it be risking your reputation for the sake of going somewhere that would make you a little uncomfortable hanging out with people that others would just kind of wonder what is he doing is it being that guy at work who who doesn't come in this weekend for the sake of that project because you have something planned with your family

I don't know what is God calling you to risk it may be your comforts it may be your perfect plan it may be even a relationship but if we don't understand our debt before God then risk will sound a lot more like duty than delight and so the last thing is this the last question do you see this woman this is a hard question for those in the room there and it's a hard question for me do I see the kind of people that Jesus loves I think the kind of people Jesus loves looks a lot like me they look very nice on Sunday mornings you all look very nice I'm pretty sure half of you guys are wearing the same shirt I'm wearing we shop at the same places we we've got our act together right do you see the

kinds of people that Jesus loves this community is filled with the type of people Jesus loves even this church is filled with the type of people Jesus loves do you love the kind of people that Jesus loves does your church to Southwood I love the many ministry partners that y'all have are you looking for opportunities to serve with some of these partnerships to serve the kind of people that Jesus loves here's the thing the danger in that whole statement that I just described is now we think that we are the better people and we can go down to those people who Jesus also loves you know we can condescend to them if we really need to and feel better about ourselves I think the reverse is true I think until we start to see that we are the kinds of people that Jesus loves the prostitute the shame the fear the anxiety until we start to see ourselves as the center in the passage we will never begin to love like Jesus loves until we have understood that we have been the one that it cost him his life to love we will never begin to love anything close to what Jesus loves there's two types of people in the passage there's probably two types of people in do you see this woman who is this man

[33 : 52] I pray that we would come to know him as he presents himself here let's pray Jesus your words are troubling because I so identify with the one who's uncomfortable in the room because there's someone who enters it rather than the one laying down crying our only hope for debt cancellation is to rest Jesus in the work that you did on the cross to cancel our debt forever and our only hope to continue to see ourselves as broken and in great need of forgiveness is by your spirit so I pray that you would do that in our hearts this week show us our sin lead us to Christ over and over again Holy Spirit we ask humbly in

Jesus name Amen For more information visit us online at southwood.org