

Luke 7:36-50 “Mission Motives: They Who Have Been Loved Much”

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[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.

Good morning. It's good to be with you all here. And that's what every speaker says, but I really mean it. Like, I kind of, for those of you who were here last night, I embarrassed myself a little bit gushing about how much I think of this church.

I just love Southwood. I can't believe I get to stand here this morning and talk to you all. You know, we have this weird thing where we tend to want to make our preachers and our musicians and whatnot celebrities in the church, of which I am certainly not one.

So we can get that cleared up. But I happen to think it's the other way around. I think the congregations themselves are the celebrities. And I'm a little bit starstruck by Southwood. It's bigger than any one person.

It's just this faithful community in Huntsville that does church well, that expresses grace really well. And so it's like a dream come true for me to be here this morning with you.

[1 : 08] When I retire from ministry, my plan is to move my family down here, join your church, and let Will be my pastor. So I'm looking forward to it. See you soon. I decided to title the theme of our weekend, Mission Motives.

And here's why. Some of you may have heard this story before. This is for you history buffs. During the Spanish-American War, Clara Barton, I don't know if you remember that name, Clara Barton was in charge of the Red Cross effort in Cuba.

And one day, a haggard colonel came up to her. His name was Theodore Roosevelt. And he was leading this regiment of men called the Rough Riders.

Have you ever heard of that? And they were beat up, tired, sick, hungry. And he asked her if he could buy some supplies. Just needed some food, some medicine. And, you know, figured that he had a friendly partner there.

And she turned him down. She just said flat out no. And he was stunned and perplexed and kind of desperate. But, you know, as tough of a man as Teddy Roosevelt was, Clara Barton was a tougher woman.

[2 : 18] So he retreated. He grouped up with his men. And he said, I don't know what we're going to do. Even in the Red Cross, Clara Barton said no. And one of his confidants said, well, Colonel, why don't you just, instead of trying to buy the supplies, why don't you just ask for them?

And it dawned on him, oh, yeah, it's the Red Cross. I don't need to try to pay for anything. It's all free. And so he went and she gladly gave what he needed.

And so the point is, it's about motives. This whole situation was a matter of getting on the same page about motives. Why do we do something? The thing that drives us on the inside really matters.

In this case, Teddy Roosevelt assumed Clara Barton would be motivated by a transactional interaction. In fact, it was the total opposite. It was the total opposite.

She was motivated by the cause. And to have some kind of transactional reaction, financial transaction would have undermined what was motivating her.

[3 : 27] It would have devalued the Red Cross's contribution. And in fact, if you think about it, if, you know, if the Red Cross started trying to make a profit off of the war, it would have really hurt the cause in the end that America was fighting for.

Which, by the way, I don't know what that was. I don't know what the Spanish did to us. But we had to work it out, apparently. Motives matter.

And, you know, nobody understands that idea better than Jesus. Jesus is very clear on this point. And this morning, we're going to read about a moment when Jesus highlighted it very explicitly. We're going to look at Luke chapter 7. And we're going to encounter two people. One was a very clean-cut man. And the other was a woman that, as we'll read, probably a woman that you would want to avoid.

So I want to look at this together. We're going to answer some questions. I'm just going to work through the passage and read it as we go. But first, would you join me? I just want to pray. Father in heaven, this is your word to us, your people.

[4 : 43] You could have stayed silent. You could have left us wondering what you were thinking. But instead, you spoke. And you spoke in beautiful stories. You came in the incarnate man, Jesus, and spoke face to face.

And now, Lord, we are listening. So would you help us understand what you had to say to us in Luke chapter 7. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. All right.

So we have a few questions this morning. The first question is this. As we read this passage, who is the worst sinner? Of the people we encounter, who's worse?

And I want to read it to you here from Luke 7, picking up in verse 36. And you see Jesus accepts an invitation to a dinner here. It says this. 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. That's code. And if you didn't catch it, he doubles down.

[5 : 44] Who was a sinner. When she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, she came in. She wasn't invited, but she just walked into his house.

She came in, 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 Jesus in, 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's a sinner. Now, the passage is very clearly setting up kind of a compare and contrast between these two people, each with their own motives before Jesus.

First, we have Simon. Simon was a Pharisee. He was a professional religion follower. And Simon invites Jesus over for a meal.

[6 : 50] Maybe they had been in synagogue earlier that day. Simon wanted to be the guy who gets to have the speaker over for lunch. And so here they are in sort of this slightly tense lunch conversation.

Then there's the woman. And this is a woman of the city, right? A woman who is a sinner. If you want me to spell it out for you. She's almost certainly a prostitute. She is practicing the world's oldest profession.

She's a businesswoman in a disgraceful business. And the passage begs this compare and contrast. And it's interesting. I really do think it's prompting us to ask, who's the worst sinner?

And what do you think? Who do you think is the worst sinner in the parable, in the story? It's not a parable. It really happened. Can I propose?

I think the woman is the worst sinner. What do you think? You might be thinking, well, I was kind of leaning that way. But then my mind was telling me, no, no, no.

[7 : 52] All sins are equally offensive and damning in the sight of God. And that's true. Every sin deserves God's curse. Doesn't matter how big, how small, how bad, how light.

But humanly speaking, at the same time, we know this. I mean, we know that different sins land in different ways. Some are more flagrantly harmful to other people.

Some are more damaging to the order of society, right? If you don't believe me, just, I assure you, if somebody called my daughter an income poop, I'd be offended.

If somebody kidnapped her, I would have a different level of emotion and response, right? These are different. They're both sinful, but they're different. So we've got these two people.

And one of them is a guy who's a religion follower. And the other one is a prostitute. And I want to be real quick here to acknowledge that many prostitutes, then and now, are stuck in a lifestyle out of despair, out of abuse, out of coercion.

[8 : 59] Many are really stuck in a life of victimhood. And yet, I think we can acknowledge, nobody puts a prostitute on a moral pedestal, right?

The Pharisee, on the other hand, this guy Simon, despite his smug, self-righteous attitude, which is pretty obvious. I mean, let's be honest. He probably lived by principles that, by and large, we in America would affirm.

That we would applaud. I mean, he's the kind of guy who created an environment for safe streets and wholesome businesses. He's the kind of guy who serves on the board of directors. He keeps his lawn cut.

He's the guy you go to polite parties with, right? He was a decent guy, generally promoting a moral society. So here's my point. Do you know that question 83 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and I don't know if you're familiar with that.

In the PCA, we have this document that kind of helps us interpret the Bible. It's called the Westminster Confession of Faith. And then there's a version of it that's made out of questions and answers. And in the Shorter Catechism, it asks this question.

[10 : 09] Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous? And the answer is no. The confession and the catechism says no. Some sins in themselves or by reason of repeated aggravations are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

Some are more heinous than others. And so I think we can make the case that the woman's sins were more heinous. And I tell you who definitely agrees with me, Simon. Simon definitely agreed.

And he was quick to say, as we see in verse 39, this is what he thinks to himself. Or I don't know. It's not clear in the Greek whether he's saying this out loud or muttering under his breath.

But it says, if this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who's touching him, for she's a sinner. The implication being that if Jesus knew what type of woman she really was, he would recoil back.

Right? He would try to distance himself from her because of his own reputation. And if I could just touch that nerve a little bit, not to be crass.

[11 : 20] This story is kind of PG-13. Let me make you feel it a little bit. Men, let me ask you something. Do you let hookers come in and start touching your feet when you're a dinner guest at somebody else's house?

That's what we're talking about here. This is bizarre. And, you know, wouldn't you be skeptical too if you were Simon? But you see, that's just it.

That's the thing about Simon. Simon was actually a sinner too. And he was so busy being skeptical that he didn't even really have much time or awareness to acknowledge that maybe he shouldn't have been there either.

See, Simon, his sins were more refined, if you will. They were a little less glaring. They were, I like to call them phantom sins. They're sort of there, but seriously, I mean, who's taken them that strongly?

That strongly. There's a guy named Jerry Bridges who wrote a book called Respectable Sins. Respectable Sins. And in his book, he scrutinizes these tolerable sins.

[12 : 35] Sins like anxiety, discontentment, thanklessness, pride, selfishness, impatience, irritability, gossip, envy, worldliness.

You know, sins that may seem more relatable for some of us as over against those like awful, dramatic sins. Those people who do all those things that we would not associate with.

Right? And so the message is this. Though we may find them to be refined and minor in nature, these kind of sins that may be a little more true of some of us, they are real and they are awful.

They are symptoms of something terribly broken in us. And yet, the worst thing of all about them is that we're not traumatized in the least by how much they offend God and his glory.

We're sort of numb to them. Here's the point. Listen, Simon's sins were of the variety that made it harder for him to feel his need for forgiveness.

[13 : 49] Mercy wasn't a functional motive in his heart. It was just kind of the batteries were dead on that. And Jesus knows that this is Simon's glaring weakness.

And so this story that seems to be about a bizarre scenario with a woman coming in uninvited, the wrong kind of woman doing the wrong kinds of things.

The story is really in many ways about Simon. And Jesus knows it and he puts his finger on it. So let's second question. As we read this, who is Jesus? Who is Jesus in this particular story?

And we'll look at verses 40 to 43 with you here. So Jesus answered and said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you.

Now, I love that. I mean, when you're talking to somebody and you first start saying something to them by saying, I have something to say to you. You know that they have something to say to you.

[14:49] You know that something's kind of serious about the situation. Simon, I have something to say to you. And Simon answered, we'll say it, teacher. And he tells this parable.

This is where the parable comes in. A certain money lender had two debtors. One owed 500 denarii and the other 50. And when they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both of them.

Now, which of them will love him more? And Simon answered, well, the one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt. And he said to him, Jesus said to Simon, well, you have judged rightly. All right. So we have a money lender and two men in debt. One of the men in debt owed 50 denarii. That's about two months wages.

The other owed 500. That's about 20 months wages. So in our economy, you bring that up to 2020s, that kind of money, we're talking, let's say for somebody who makes \$70,000.

[15:53] That's their annual salary. We're talking two months wages, \$11,600. If we're looking at 20 months wages, \$116,000, \$117,000 of debt.

And the money lender forgives both of them. Just flat out. Just done. Now, Jesus, he turns to Simon in verse 42, and he asks a very important question in a very specific way.

And this is the punchline on the whole thing. This is the whole passage pivots on this question. He says, Simon, which of these guys who has had their debt erased will love the gracious lender more?

Love the gracious lender more. And Simon, who's, as best I can read, somewhere between kind of confused and kind of cocky, says, well, I suppose one who he's forgiven more. And Jesus says, uh-huh.

You're following, right, Simon? You understand the point I'm making here. And we never find out. We don't know if Simon embraces the lesson. But obviously, he is impugning himself with that answer.

[17:03] Because although the men in debt owed vastly different amounts, the bottom line was not how much they owed. It was whether or not they would be forgiven. Because neither of them could pay it.

So who is Jesus? Jesus is not primarily the one who forgives \$11,000 for one person and \$116,000 for another. Jesus is primarily the one who forgives.

At all. That's the thing. See, \$11,000 versus \$116,000 is relative, right? The person that owes \$11,000 owes a lot less.

Except the guy who owes \$11,000 owes a lot more than the person who owes \$50. And so who should love the forgiver more?

It's not a matter of comparison. It's a matter of recognizing I can't believe I'm one of the people who gets to be forgiven.

[18:03] And granted, again, the point I'm making this morning, \$11,000 really is less than \$116,000. But if you're facing bankruptcy and you can only come up with 27 cents, it doesn't matter how much you owe.

Your only hope is forgiveness for your own situation. And Simon fell into the trap of thinking that he was sitting at the same level as Jesus.

Like you and me, Jesus, trying to figure out who earns love and who doesn't. And Jesus is like, dude, it's not you and me. It's not you and me at the same level.

Simon really had no fear of his sin. You ever catch yourself there? Those of us of respectable sins. You know, you find yourself thinking maybe quietly, why must I live in a world with so many fools around me?

You know, why can't they just see things the way I do? Sure, I owe God a little bit. I know that. But look at her. I mean, look at how much that guy must need to be forgiven.

[19:11] Simon, Simon, Jesus could tell, was not roaming the earth looking for relief, looking for someone kind to finally free him from his shameful debt.

He wasn't even looking for it. And so sadly, Simon, though his sins may have been relatively less, he's the one who comes off the most foolhardy. The woman, on the other hand, though, how beautiful is this?

This woman, she understood Jesus is separate. Jesus stands alone. There's him and then there's just all of us. And maybe she had been miserable for a long time.

Maybe she had been unaware there could even be freedom for somebody in her rotten place in society. And maybe she was also at that synagogue that morning and heard Jesus talking and realized for the first time in her life, Now that's somebody who could actually see me and love me as I am.

The kind of person that Jesus came to heal. And when she found what she was looking for, what did she do? She bowed down and wept because she realized she had been forgiven much.

[20 : 32] So what hangs in the balance here as to whether or not you realize that you've been forgiven much or you assume that other people are those who need to be forgiven much?

That you're helping Jesus kind of, you know, make the filtering happen. What hangs in the balance? What hangs in the balance for you as to whether or not you will get profoundly in touch with the reality of having been forgiven?

If we look at the passage here, if she or he who is forgiven much loves much, it must be love that hangs in the balance.

So let's look at that. Let's read the end here, verses 44 to 50. It says, Then turning toward the woman, Jesus 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.

[21 : 49] Therefore, I tell you, Simon, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.

But he who is forgiven little loves little. And then he said to her, Your sins are forgiven. And then those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, Who is this guy who even forgives sins?

And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you. You. You can go in peace. So what's really going on here?

Simon thought the woman was a worse sinner than him, and therefore she was less valuable. He thought she was less valuable. But Jesus says, Man, no.

Look, think about motives. Think about motives. Who's going to leave here motivated today? If she is forgiven more, if that sense of freedom from guilt is animating her, driving her outlook on the world, she's going to be motivated to love better, which means she will be more valuable to the kingdom of God.

[23 : 09] She is going to be motivated to love. So what do we learn about love here? Just two quick things. First of all, two great commands, right? Where does she start? She pours out her love to Jesus.

She loves the Lord her God with her heart and her soul. She did all the things that Simon so rudely did not do. She washed his feet. She kissed his feet. She anointed his head. She let her emotions out in front of Jesus.

She let her hair down in front of Jesus. She spilled all of her expensive perfume on Jesus. Man, if I could be so lucky, to worship half as passionately as that most days of my life.

Just half as enthusiastically. She worshiped. She loved Jesus. Now, second, we learn about love toward neighbor.

And specifically, to the point of our conference this weekend, we learn about loving those who we view as lower on the social totem pole than us. I mean, first of all, I love how Jesus draws attention toward her.

[24 : 17] See, he's talking to Simon, but did you notice where the passage says he's looking? As he's talking to Simon, he's looking at the woman. And he says, Jesus. I mean, he says, Simon, do you see her?

And I find that's the main challenge. Just seeing anybody that's lower than I perceive myself to be. Seeing them long enough to find out why they've landed where they have in life.

Seeing them well enough to imagine that that could be my mother or my daughter. Or that could be me. Seeing them with the eyes of Jesus.

And maybe for you, the people you see day in and day out that maybe you see but you don't see. Maybe it's a prostitute. The way St. Louis is built, I don't encounter prostitutes very often in my goings to and fro, coming and going.

But maybe it's a beggar on the street corner at the King's Highway exit, which I do travel most days. Or maybe it's that disgraced co-worker who nobody wants to talk to anymore.

[25 : 27] Or maybe it's a person with a mental disorder. Maybe it's somebody that's homebound now and kind of just forgotten about. Maybe it's the hoarder we talked about last night.

The ability to see somebody motivated by a heart of mercy and humility. That knows that the Lord holds my lot.

That I'm in good hands. That I have a beautiful inheritance. That I'm not shaken. That the person whose heart is glad and who is at peace. That person can afford to stop fretting about themselves and give attention to that invisible person in front of them.

I remember one time as a kid at a worship service at the church I grew up at, Trinity Presbyterian in Charlottesville, Virginia. And we were at a worship service.

For some reason, I was pretty young, but I think it was an evening service, as best I can remember. We were there. We were singing. And the doors at the back opened. And a man walked in.

[26 : 33] And he started walking down the center aisle in the middle of service, disheveled. He appeared to be wearing all the clothes that he owned. They were tattered. His hair was all a mess.

He was presumably homeless. And he walked down the middle aisle almost to the front row. And there was like an empty seat in the second or third row. And he just sat down.

Now, this is disorienting because where this church is located was at the end of a cul-de-sac down a long wooded road. There was no passing by to get somewhere else. There were never people who just happened to be walking in the neighborhood.

How he got there, I'll never know. But he walked down, and it was causing some alarm for people. It was confusing. It was distracting enough that people were looking as they were singing.

Even the people who were standing on stage were kind of looking like, is this okay? How's this? Like, what's going to happen next? And one of our assistant pastors was sitting in the front row, realized the people on stage were squirming a little bit.

[27 : 37] And he turned around to see what was going on. And he saw this man. Instantly. Instantly. He just turned around. Walked back to the fourth row. Sat down next to this man.

Put his arm around his shoulder. Put his head back up and just kept singing. I've never forgotten that, obviously. Mike Sherritt.

What a man. I'll tell you something about Mike. I can't remember a single word he ever preached from the pulpit. He was a good preacher. I'm not saying he wasn't a good preacher.

I'm just saying. More is usually caught than taught. Right? And I caught something as a kid that day. I remember thinking, okay, well, I mean, I guess this is what we do as Jesus followers.

I guess that's how we do it. And I've lived with that ever since. And I'm still trying to be like Mike. Share it. Share it. He just lived that way.

[28 : 36] That's who he was. That's who he was. That's who he was consistently. That's what made him ready for an unexpected moment like that. It's because it was already in there. A love for others motivated by Jesus' love for him.

Jesus started it. Jesus loved his neighbors. Even the least of these. The lost.

The loneliest. The littlest. The left out. And Jesus actually said for those who are tracking along and are like feeling motivated. Okay, I recognize I have been forgiven much.

How do I love much? Jesus said, if you have an awareness of your forgiveness and it's giving birth to a desire to want to do something, you should know if you've given water to the thirsty, if you've given food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, shelter to the stranger, care to the sick, that's the same as if you're giving it to Jesus.

And my guess is that's how this woman in this story in Luke 7 lived a whole lot for the rest of her life. Just a little bit of like practical maybe help on the way out the door here today.

[29 : 51] When you find yourself getting haughty, you know, kind of puffed up, irritated at the foolish people around you, just stop and ask yourself, what's the ugliest thing you've done this month?

The ugliest words you've said, the ugliest action you've taken, I'll just tell you this, sometimes our stupidity is a gift.

And I'm not saying chase after sin. Don't chase after sin. But also don't waste its memory. Maybe even pray for a little failure every now and then, a little humiliation.

It can turn into love when you realize you're forgiven of it. So I challenge you all, Southwood, to carry a burden for people beneath you for the least.

I challenge you to see them, to engage them, to love them much, and to do it because forgiveness has done its work on you.

[30 : 57] Love your neighbor because you have ingested grace. And that that's the thing that's motivating you to express grace. Let me pray.

Father in heaven, this passage challenges me. I think there are too many days when, if I'm honest, I identify with Simon.

I just don't like that. I don't want to be that guy. I want you to cleanse it out of me day by day. I want you to give me eyes to see, first and foremost, my guilt, my sin.

Help me to identify more with the woman. And then help me to respond like the woman. To you, Jesus, with extravagant love. And then to my neighbor, the one I would otherwise look right past.

Father, I pray that you would make Southwood that kind of place. When people talk about Southwood around Huntsville, they'd say, oh, yeah, I've heard of them. That's that church of people who love much. They invite in people of every variety with the kind of heart that I guess you'd only have if you know you've been forgiven much.

[32 : 12] And I see that happening in this church. I've seen it just this weekend. So I give you thanks and praise. I do it all in Jesus' name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

Now let's just name our ■ Let's meet some of our guests.

Let's stay together.