

Luke 7:36-50

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[0 : 00] How's the mic going?

Oh, there we are. Gotcha. Well, friends, we're in Luke chapter 7 this morning. Gospel of Luke chapter 7, verses 36 through 50.

That's page 864 in the Pew Bible. Let's turn there together. In the Gospels, we actually read of two different occasions when Jesus is anointed with oil or ointment.

One happens near the end of his ministry in a town called Bethany as he's ministering in Jerusalem for the last time. But the other happens actually early in his ministry in Galilee.

And it's this earlier event that Luke records for us here in chapter 7. So why don't we pray as we come to God's Word together. God, as we come before you this morning, we are so grateful that you are a missionary God.

[1 : 22] That you have sent your Son on a great mission of redemption. God, you are the great sender and you have come to rescue.

And Lord, we thank you that it's your Word that goes forth. That opens our eyes and softens our hearts and imparts life to us.

So we pray, Father, that by your Spirit, working by and with the Word, we would be addressed by you this morning. Lord Jesus, that you would be indeed just that Lord over our hearts, over our lives, over our church.

And we pray over our city. So we come before you with humility and with confidence this morning. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Amen. Well, friends, why don't we stand? This is something we don't actually do a lot. Why don't we stand as I read God's Word together? We'll stretch our legs. And we'll also honor God's Word at the same time.

[2 : 38] Luke chapter 7, verse 36. One of the Pharisees asked him, that is, Jesus, to eat with him.

And he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at 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 wipe 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.

[3 : 39] 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 him more? Simon answered, the one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt.

And Jesus said to him, you judge rightly. And turning toward 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. 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. Go in peace. Be seated. Be seated. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

[5 : 00] Of course, that's the opening line of John Newton's famous 18th century hymn. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. A few decades earlier, however, a much less famous letter was being written.

And that carried the exact opposite sentiment. Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, had invited her friend, the Duchess of Buckingham, to come hear George Whitefield preach. But the Duchess sent back this reply, commenting on the preaching of Whitefield. She wrote, Amazing grace for wretched sinners.

To one, it's a sweet sound. And to the other, it's something monstrous, offensive, and insulting. Of course, you don't have to go all the way back to the 18th century to find both of those reactions to the message of Christianity, do you?

Plenty of people today react the same way. Either attracted or repulsed. And of course, it wasn't something new in the 18th century either. In fact, that dual response to the message of Christianity goes all the way back to the very beginning.

[6 : 40] Right here, in our text from Luke, we see two characters. One attracted to Jesus. The other repelled.

And this text actually forces us to ask, Which one am I? How does my heart respond to Jesus and his grace?

So as we look at this story this morning, first, we're going to take a look at how these two characters are different. And then we're going to see what reason Jesus says is the reason why they're so different.

And then last, we'll see why that reason is such good news. So first, two people respond to Jesus. It's hard to imagine here two people being more different than the two characters responding to Jesus in this text, right?

Think about these two people. One had a high social position. The other was a social outcast. One was wealthy enough to host a dinner party in his own house. The other was an uninvited guest. One was morally respectable.

[7 : 49] The other was notoriously disreputable. Simon, we're told, is a Pharisee. He's religious. He's principled. He's upright. This is the guy that you'd probably want your daughter to date or something.

The woman, we're told, however, is a sinner. And although Luke doesn't say, historically, many have suspected that her sinful reputation was because she was a prostitute.

And as different as these two people are, it's hard to imagine two people responding in such different ways to Jesus. First, consider the woman. Listen, she lavishes her affection on Jesus publicly, openly.

She expresses her devotion and love for him. Now, picture this scene that Luke is retelling for us. A dinner party like this would have been held actually in the courtyard of a house.

The climate was actually much too hot in those days to have such a large gathering indoors. And such gatherings in those days weren't actually as private as ours would be today.

[8 : 58] The doors would have remained open, allowing extra friends and even uninvited passersby to sort of wander in and sit around the edge of the courtyard. They had sort of different understanding of public and private those days.

And dining in those days happened around a table that was actually low to the ground. So to eat, you would actually recline or you would lie down, typically on your left side, with your legs sort of stretching out away from the table.

So now you can picture in your mind how this scene unfolds. The meal is taking place. And suddenly, Luke says, And behold, a woman from the edge of the courtyard, a woman no one invited, but everyone recognizes, comes to the table, right up to Jesus.

With a flask of ointment in her hands, clearly she intends to anoint Jesus' feet. You see, in that hot, dry, eastern climate, oils and ointments were used much more extensively than ours to keep the skin from drying and cracking.

But this was also a common custom to show respect, to honor someone. But before she can begin to anoint his feet, she's overcome with emotion and begins to weep.

[10:13] And then, seeing her tears fall on Jesus' feet, she instinctively undoes her hair, lets it down for all to see, and begins to wipe and dry Jesus' feet with her hair.

But you see, in that day, letting down your hair was something that no decent woman would do in public. It was one of those sort of social mores, one of those social standards. Women didn't do that.

That was scandalous. So you can hear the gasps around the table. And if the conversation hasn't stopped to start staring, everyone's staring now. But on she goes, not just wiping his feet with her hair, but kissing them too.

Another tremendous sign of honor. And then finally, she anoints his feet with the ointment. What a scene. And you have to admit that if you were sitting there in the courtyard, you would have probably been a bit taken back too.

I mean, it's almost a bit embarrassing, isn't it? A woman weeping and kissing and rubbing her hair on Jesus' feet.

[11:23] Feet, which we learn a little later in the story, had not even been washed by his host. Still dirty from the dusts of the streets. So there she is, a bit of a mess. Emotional, weeping, dirt clinging to her hair from Jesus' feet, people staring.

And yet one thing is very clear. This woman loves Jesus deeply. Does she not?

Contrast that response with Simon's. Now, we don't know why Simon invited Jesus for a meal in the first place.

Perhaps this was a Sabbath meal after Jesus had preached in the local synagogue. That was a common custom. Maybe Simon always had the preacher over for lunch afterwards. Whoever happened to be in town, well, you were coming to Simon's house.

Or maybe Simon was just curious about Jesus. Or maybe he wanted to have the honor of hosting this famous rabbi from Nazareth that everyone was talking about that he had heard so much about.

[12:30] Whatever it is, Jesus accepts his invitation. He's willing to give even this Pharisee an opportunity to hear the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus has come to seek and save sinners no matter what kind of sinners they look like.

But after the incident with the sinful woman, Simon's mind is made up. After the sinful woman honors Jesus openly, Simon scorns Jesus secretly.

No real prophet would let a woman like that put her unclean hands on him. You can just feel the scorn dripping in his mind, both towards the woman and toward Jesus.

For Simon, you see, it's quite simple, isn't it? It all adds up. The woman was a notorious sinner. She had broken all God's commands. She was beyond the pale of God's kingdom. And if Jesus couldn't see that, then he couldn't possibly be who he claims to be.

So Simon, seeing the company that Jesus apparently keeps, closes the book on the so-called prophet from Nazareth. Two very different people.

[13:44] Two very different responses. So friends, I wonder if you see yourself in either of these characters. You see the lavish love of the sinful woman?

Or the respectable scorn of Simon the Pharisee? Maybe it would help if we ask some questions to our own hearts that these characters and their actions put to us.

Here's a question. How much of my spiritual neediness am I willing to let others see? How much of my own spiritual neediness am I willing to let other people see?

When this woman comes before Jesus, she's willing to let all sorts of things hang loose, isn't she?

Her past, her reputation, her emotional state. Is that the way it is when we come before Christ?

Are we willing to let others see that we're actually struggling? That we actually have spiritual needs? That we're actually sinners? Or like Simon, do we just keep our thoughts to ourselves?

[14:53] When we gather on Sundays, for instance, are we simply here to show everyone that we're doing okay? Or are we actually willing to let people see that we don't actually have it all together?

Now, I'm just as guilty of this as anybody else. I can yell at my kids on the drive into the parking lot. And I can be nursing a three-day-long grudge against my wife.

Or I can be beating myself up over some failure of the past week. But as soon as I walk through those doors, I'm doing great. Nothing wrong here.

How are you? I got a tie on. How about you, friend? Is there some context where you're willing to let your guard down?

To let someone behind the curtain to see what's really going on? If it's not Sunday, is it small group? If it's not small group, is it a relationship with someone in the church?

[16:02] Is there anyone who knows what you're struggling with? And if so, why not stop putting on a show when we all get together? Yes, there's an appropriate time and place to fully open up.

I get that. But are you finding the time? Are you willing to find the place? If not, maybe there's less of this woman's love and more of this Pharisee's scorn in our hearts than we care to admit.

Here's another question. Is there a limit on what I think Jesus could ask of me? Is there a limit on what I think Jesus could ask of me?

Simon had Jesus into his home for a meal. But as Jesus points out a little later in verses 44 through 46, Simon refrained from any other signs of honor, even the basic acts of hospitality.

Simon was willing to go only so far in his identification with Jesus, only so far in his service of him. But the woman is willing to get as low as a servant, right down at Jesus' feet to wash the dirt off.

[17:17] There was no limit on what she would do for him. Whether it was financially costly, like breaking open a whole alabaster flask of ointment, which would not have been cheap in those days.

Or whether it's socially costly, like standing up before a whole gathering of folks who know your past and don't want anything to do with you. She was undeterred. Is it that way for you?

Or is there a line? Where God can't cross. I love you and serve you, Lord, so long as it doesn't involve my job.

That I've worked so hard to achieve. This relationship that I've wanted for so long. The approval of my peers. The truth is we all come up against those limits, don't we?

We all feel that tug. We all feel that pull. We all find that we have limits. One more question.

[18:28] How do I respond to people I think of as sinners? How do I respond to people I think of as sinners?

Simon knew all about this woman, and he didn't want his life to touch her life in any way. How do we respond to people we think of as sinners?

What do we say about them? How do we treat them? If someone were to read your Facebook posts over the past nine months, what impression would they give? Here's a person whose life is a person who's a person who's a sinner?

Here's a person whose life is marked by the grace of Christ, who's striving to treat others with civility and understanding and patience, even with those that they disagree with?

Is that what they would see? Or rather, would they see snap judgments and snarky one-liners and long, angry tirades, us versus them?

[19:31] What impression would a reader get? Would they think that the love of Christ is governing your responses? And putting social media aside, what about your actual relationships?

Do you really believe that God has grace for sinners and that He wants to use you to share it with them?

Or would you and I rather that our lives not actually touch theirs in any way? Like those neighbors who really don't want anything to do with Jesus? Or that classmate who's notorious for hooking up with a different girl every weekend?

What about him? Or what about that family member who's been in and out of rehab? How do you view them? How do you respond to them? What attitude do you hold in your heart toward them?

So here we have two very different people. Two very different responses to Jesus. Two very different heart attitudes.

[20:39] And I think if we're honest friends, we're more like Simon than we care to admit. But the text doesn't stop there. Next, Jesus Himself is going to show us what's underneath.

How is it that one is so loving and the other so cold? What has made their hearts so radically different? And what is it that will change our hearts?

What is it that will move us from secret, hard-hearted scorn to open, lavish, free love? Rather than telling us, Jesus is going to show us.

And He's going to show us through a simple story of two debtors. In verse 40, Jesus answers Simon. That's an interesting note by Luke, isn't it?

That Jesus answers him. Answers Simon's silent thoughts. Because after all, Jesus is a prophet. And much more than a prophet.

[21:44] Not only does He not know everything about this woman, He knows everything about her and He knows everything about Simon too. So, He answers. And here's the story. One person

owes 50 denarii.

And a denarius is a day's wage. So, almost two months' salary here. 50 denarii. And the other owes 500. Well over a year's salary.

Think in your mind how much that might be for you. And the money lender, in an act of sheer generosity, cancels the debt of them both.

And then Jesus asks a very simple question to Simon. Simon, which one will love Him more? Of course, the one who had the greater debt canceled, right? And then in verse 44, Jesus brings it home.

Simon didn't give Jesus so much as the basic acts of hospitality. No water for His feet. No kiss of welcome. No oil to honor Him. Yet she went above and beyond this sinful woman He has so much scorn for.

[22 : 46] She has done what He has refused to do. It's clear, is it not, which one loves more.

But why? Because one of them knows the heart-liberating power of the forgiveness of sins. And the other one doesn't. That's the point.

You see, Simon thinks that this woman's great sins puts her beyond the pale of the kingdom of God. But Jesus sees that great sinners, when forgiven by God, make great lovers of God.

Of course, Jesus' point isn't that Simon has fewer sins than this woman. Rather, Jesus is showing us that the real danger isn't how much you've sinned, but how little you think you need forgiveness. The real danger, friends, isn't how much you've sinned, but how little you think you need forgiveness.

[23 : 53] And it's forgiveness, received, experienced, internalized, that releases the floodgates of grateful love.

But, he who is forgiven little, loves little. Why are so many churches, even so many Christians, self-righteous, hypocritical, judgmental?

And why, too often than I care to admit, can I be the same way? Because we say we need forgiveness in our heads, but we don't really believe it in our hearts.

Our little love proves that we know but little forgiveness, if any at all. This was a critical lesson for Luke's day.

Read the book of Acts. As the gospel of Jesus went forth, Greeks and Romans, Gentile pagans, came streaming into the church. Former cult prostitutes, imperial government workers, tradesmen, day laborers.

[25 : 08] And what would the faithful Jews think of these notorious sinners flocking to their Messiah? Would they want nothing to do with them? Or would they admit that they, too, were hopeless sinners, that no one could be justified by the works of the law?

Would they, too, see that they had a need for radical grace? And would they embrace these Gentile converts as brothers and sisters in Christ? But, friends, if that message was critical for the church in Luke's day, it's so critical for us today, too.

Only as our hearts continue to be gripped by the radical forgiveness of the gospel will we be a church ready to meet our neighbors with good news.

Not to affirm them in their waywardness, but to approach them as people made in the image of God, for whom God sent His only Son to love them and rescue them and draw them to Himself just like God has done for us.

Which is to say that if we grasp how much we ourselves have been forgiven, it will change how we respond to the people that we think of as sinners. We can't possibly view them in the same way anymore.

[26 : 48] But what about the other two questions we raised? How much of my spiritual neediness am I willing to let others see? Is there a limit on what I think Jesus could ask me? Is not the radical experience of forgiveness what allowed this sinful woman both to let others see her neediness without shame and to put no limits on her love for Christ?

Of course, we don't know exactly when she came to understand forgiveness through Jesus. Was it through His teaching on some other occasion? Perhaps it was in the synagogue that very morning. We don't know.

But Jesus is very clear. Her sins, which are many, are forgiven. And how does Jesus know that? What does He point us to as the sign?

For she loved much. And of course, Jesus isn't saying that her love was the cause of her forgiveness, right? The whole point of the passage is the exact opposite. What Jesus means is clear. Her sins are forgiven and that's why she loves so much. That's why she could let others see her without hiding. That's why she could love Jesus without limits.

[27 : 59] And friend, if you come to know that forgiveness, you won't need to hide either. You won't live for other people's approval or affirmation. You won't need to put on a good show.

Why? Because the verdict's already come down on you. When you see how much you've been forgiven, you realize that the truth about you is much, much worse than people think.

It's much, much worse than you thought. You need radical forgiveness. It's really that bad.

Whatever I'm struggling with this morning isn't half of what my real problem is. So you can stop pretending like everything's okay.

And you can stop trying to puff yourself up before other people. And at the same time, the verdict has come down, not just showing you how much you need forgiveness, but how great a forgiveness you've received.

[29 : 11] Every penny has been paid. The debt is gone. And in Christ, you have nothing to fear. So you don't need to hide. And you don't need to hold back.

If that's how much he's done for you, if he's erased the debt you could never pay, if he's secured your eternal redemption, how could you not love him and trust him?

How could we not want to do anything he asks if he's done that for us? A love without limits flows from a forgiven heart.

So the real difference between these two people, between these two heart attitudes, comes down to forgiveness. If you know you've been forgiven much, you will love much.

But there's one last thing Luke wants us to see. Not just the contrast between these two characters, not just the forgiveness that produces love, but he wants us to see something about this forgiveness that makes it so life-changing.

[30 : 25] After all, how do we get this forgiveness? How does it come to us? What do we have to do to get it? And this is how the text ends in verses 48 through 50.

After finishing his challenge to Simon, he now turns to the woman 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. Go in peace. How does this heart changing forgiveness come to us?

Faith. But think of how strange that is. How can faith alone save us?

Isn't that the strangest thing you've ever heard? I know you've heard it a lot. You're just too used to it. How can Jesus be so confident that simply through this woman putting her faith, her trust in him, that her debt of sin will be totally taken care of?

[31 : 34] What an odd thing to say. How can Jesus be so sure? God will do it forever? Well, friends, the answer is that because even now, in this very moment, sitting around that table, Jesus knows what he's come to do.

Like the money lender in his own story, Jesus has come to cancel our debt. sin. The apostle Paul put it this way, on the cross, God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

On the cross, Jesus was our substitute paying our debt, and that payment was so sufficient, so complete, so massive that there's nothing left for us to do but to receive it.

Just to trust him that he's done it all and to place our faith in him. You see, friends, forgiveness has to be through faith alone.

It has to be that radical and that free. Because if any ounce of our own work or our own merit or our own acts of love need to be added to it, then the cross wasn't the full payment for our sin.

[33 : 08] That Jesus' death was insufficient for us. That it fell short, that it wasn't enough, that the death of the very Son of God in your place had something missing in it.

What an absurd thought. God and if that's true, then Jesus couldn't say your faith has saved you, go in peace. But you see, friends, the death of Christ for you needs no supplement.

It needs no addition. It was the complete payment of your debt. how do we know?

Because three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate that every single sin for everyone who repents and believes was totally paid for.

Death couldn't hold Jesus. Why? Why? Because he had done away with sin. And if sin was gone, then death laid no claim on him.

[34 : 24] And now everyone who repents and believes in him enters into that sin-defeating death and that resurrection for justification. It's done.

It's complete. This is how radically free forgiveness is to us.

So radical that we can have it through faith and faith alone. But it's free to us, friends, because it was so costly for him. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

Can you say that this morning? The one who's forgiven little loves little, yes, but the one who is forgiven much loves much. May we be a church who knows that our many and great sins have been forgiven, and may we love much.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, that is our prayer, that we would be a church that loves much, and that we would be a church for whom your great forgiveness of our sins would always be fresh and always be new.

[35 : 54] So, Lord Jesus, send your spirit into our hearts. Blow across the dying coals within us. Kindle that flame of love once again for you.

Help us to see that though our sins are as scarlet, you have washed them white as snow. We ask this in your name, Lord Jesus.

Amen.