

This morning, I am in the ninth week of a sermon series that I've entitled "Meeting Jesus." I am making my way through Luke's account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning we'll be in Luke 7:36-50, looking at Jesus' interaction with two people, a Pharisee named Simon, and a nameless person who is called "a woman who had lived a sinful life." We'll go through the passage a section at a time so that I can give some background to what is going on, and then I'm going to ask you three questions based on this passage.

Luke 7:36-50 - When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

Wow. What an incredible scene. What is going on here? Let me give some background.

There are three main characters in this story: Jesus, a Pharisee named Simon, and a woman who lived a sinful life. The Pharisees were in many ways the religious leaders of Israel. The word Pharisee is from the Hebrew word Parash – to separate. The Pharisees' chief concern was that the Jewish people would be holy, that they would be **pure and faithful to God's law, separate from pagan influences**. One of the reasons for this focus on purity was that Israel was under Roman oppression, and the Pharisees believed that God would send a Messiah who would liberate the Jewish people from their Roman oppressors, but that he would not come until the people were pure. So, the Pharisees tried to steadfastly keep all of God's rules from the Old Testament, and they even added more rules of their own in order to help the Jewish people maintain their purity. **On the positive side**, their desire for holiness and faithfulness was commendable. But on the negative side, they would often treat their own manmade laws as if they were equal to God's laws. And secondly, their devotion to purity caused them to be very judgmental of those whose lives did not measure up, those who transgressed their laws. **You can imagine, with such a focus on purity, what kind of people they would not be happy with.** They weren't happy with the Jews who broke God's laws, because the Pharisees believed that such sinners were preventing the Messiah from coming and the Jews from achieving freedom. So, **their goals were admirable – purity,**

freedom, faithfulness to God – but it caused them to behave in judgmental ways towards others which caused Jesus to criticize them vehemently.

Now that you understand the Pharisees, perhaps you can see more clearly why they were always so suspicious of Jesus. The Pharisees had a clear agenda – **promote purity and faithfulness to God and pile pressure and guilt on impure Jews until they repented so that Israel would become pure enough for the Messiah, the liberator, to come**. And on to their turf comes this prophet to whom people – especially the sinful, impure people – are flocking. So, everywhere Jesus went, the Pharisees watched him closely to see if he would uphold their agenda or promote a different agenda. The Pharisees were so sure they were right that about what it meant to follow and know God that they would not tolerate different agendas.

And so, when Jesus comes to this town, Simon, one of the most prominent Pharisees, invites him to his home to share a meal and get to know what this Jesus character is all about. Let me give you a little background on meal-sharing in Jesus' time, because I think it will help you understand this passage better. When an important religious person such as Jesus came to town, he would have been invited to the religious leaders' home for a meal with some of the most important men in the town. The meal would take place in a **courtyard** of a home, and **the gate would be left open so that people could see the honored guest in the courtyard**. People were even allowed to walk in and hang out along the walls and listen in on the conversation. It was a way of honoring the host, who was obviously a person important enough to host the town guests.

There was also a traditional greeting when a man came for a meal, and it consisted of **three things** – two major and one minor. **The men would kiss (like shaking hands), a servant would wash the guest's feet before he reclined at the table to eat, and the guest would be anointed with scented olive oil, usually to the hair**. They would then recline at a three-sided table shaped like a U, propped up on their left elbow, with their feet behind them, and with servants in the inner ring.

So, in this passage, a Pharisee named Simon invites Jesus to have a meal with him, so Jesus goes in and reclines at the table. Notice, however, that there is no mention of any greeting, which is confirmed later by Jesus' words. There is no kiss, no washing of feet, no anointing with oil, nothing to say to Jesus that you are a welcomed guest in my home. This is not an oversight; **rather, it is likely a deliberate attempt by Simon and the other Pharisees to communicate to Jesus that they are the authorities and that he is under examination. Or, worse, it may be attempt to bring public shame on Jesus, to not show him honor**. Why?

As I mentioned earlier, the Pharisees believed themselves to be the watchdogs, sure of their purity and their agenda and suspicious of anyone who gained a following that might undermine their agenda. **This meal was not a pleasant and relaxing occasion, but a test** of whether or not Jesus lined up with their agenda.

But something shocking happens to undercut Simon's plan. Remember that they are dining in a courtyard, reclined at a table, in view of anyone who wished to join them. And into the crowd comes a woman who sees this public attempt to bring shame to Jesus. We don't know much about this woman, only that she has lived a life of sin, which is code for sexual impurity. As a result, she would have been sharply criticized by the religious leaders of her day as someone who was responsible for delaying the coming of the Messiah and wrecking the Jewish identity. **Somewhere along the way, this woman must have experienced some of Jesus' teaching or healing or forgiveness and recognized that he was not like the other religious men.** So, as she sees him being publicly humiliated by Simon and the other Pharisees, she takes an incredible risk to go in and honor Jesus. **Why is her behavior so risky?**

- 1) **She touches him** - Women were not allowed to touch men who were not their husbands, and here she was touching the feet of a religious teacher.
- 2) **She uses her jar of perfume** - Her jar of alabaster perfume is most likely from her trade, a sign of her immorality. Remember that people did not smell great in those days, and so her perfume would have been critical to earning a living
- 3) **She lets her hair down** – something seen as an erotic, scandalous thing to do in those days

This woman takes an incredible risk, not only offending everyone in the room by touching a man who was not her husband, but risking rejection by the one person whose opinion of her obviously matters. She sees Jesus being shamed, and she goes in to him, weeping, wets his feet with her tears, lets down her hair and washes his feet with her hair, kisses the feet of Jesus and anoints them with oil. **Something has happened that has so transformed this woman's heart that she is willing to risk it all to honor Jesus and to let Jesus know that he is welcome in this place.**

And Jesus does not reject the woman. As she lays there at his feet, sobbing and washing his feet, he does not push her away. But look at Simon's reaction. Simon, watching this scene, says to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is-- that she is a sinner." In Greek, the tense that is used brings out what he is really saying. Firstly, the phrase

“if this man were a prophet” has an edge to it – “if this man were a prophet – and we know he isn’t.” Secondly, the word for touch is the Greek word *apto*, which has a connotation of **lighting, igniting, provoking, or turning on**. Simon is saying “if this man were a prophet – and we know that he isn’t – he would know that this woman is trying to turn him on, and he would reject her.” Simon interprets the woman’s maneuvers as a sexual advance on Jesus, and sees Jesus’ refusal to expel her as proof that he is not a prophet, since he is obviously not upholding their laws of modesty.

But Jesus turns to Simon and says:

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. ⁴¹ “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. ⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Notice what Jesus does. He turns to the woman but speaks to Simon. Jesus is so tender, so loving towards this woman. He honors the woman, who has acted graciously and out of love, while exposing Simon for the ungrateful, unloving man he is. Notice that he still calls what she has done sin – he doesn’t pretend that what she has done doesn’t matter – but he says that she is forgiven. And He proclaims that the one who is forgiven little loves little, but he who has been forgiven much loves much.

Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Jesus says to the woman, “your sins are forgiven.” **Simon and the Pharisees thought that faithfulness to God meant erecting boundaries which kept the pure in and the impure out.** But Jesus comes and breaks down the boundary, forgiving the sins of a sexually impure woman and welcoming her. And the people are astonished, saying “who is this who even forgives sins?” Why are they so astonished? Because in Jesus’ day forgiveness wasn’t something that someone could just pronounce over you. **Forgiveness was connected to the Temple** and the sacrificial system, where a priest would offer sacrifice for your sins. That was the only way you could be forgiven. But Jesus pronounces with authority that this woman’s sins are forgiven. For Jesus to forgive this woman is **like me giving you a driver’s license apart from the DMV.** Imagine how the DMV and the police would feel about that! They would question where I have gotten the authority to declare someone fit to drive. That’s how the Pharisees would have felt about some rogue prophet offering people forgiveness for their sins apart from the Temple. But Jesus has declared that this woman’s sins have been forgiven, that her faith has saved her, that she can leave in peace.

This is a phenomenal story with a simple truth – the one who has been forgiven much loves much, while the one who has been forgiven little loves little. But in this simple story, I think there are enormous implications for us, for our church, and especially for our relationships to God. So let me ask you three questions:

1) How much do you love God?

Even as I ask that question, I would imagine that some of you instinctively come close to tears, while others of you are puzzled, wondering how anyone can love God. How do you have affection for a spirit, how are you moved emotionally by someone or something you can not see, how can you love God?

But remember what Jesus said the greatest commandment is:

Matthew 22:36-38 – “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”
³⁷ Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.”

The greatest commandment is not just to believe in God, but to love God. After all, remember what James said about believing in God:

James 2:19 - You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and **shudder.**

What an incredible statement. You believe in God? Congratulations - even the demons believe that God is real, and more strongly than you do, because they have been in His presence. But they do not love God. To love God is something completely different. How does one acquire a love for God, genuine affection for a spiritual being?

John tells us:

1 John 4:19 - **We love because he** first loved us.

Genuine love for God is not something we can just create ourselves. It arises in response to His love for us. **Do you understand what He did for you?** He left the comfort of heaven to seek and save you. Like the shepherd leaving the 99 to find the 1, he came for you, to rescue you. Like the Father on the porch, He ran out to meet you when you turned back to Him. He sweat blood in the garden of Gethsemane while his friend fell asleep, yet he said “not my will but yours be done.” He was rejected, abandoned, mocked, spit upon. He had a crown of thorns jammed onto his head. He was forced to carry the cross. He was completely innocent, yet was tried and found guilty of blasphemy, of making himself out to be God. He was nailed to a cross. The Father put upon Him the sins of the world on him, abandoning him. He was buried in a grave. All out of love for you.

Few writers capture this better than Brennan Manning. Listen to his words from his book *The Signature of Jesus*:

“On the night of December 13, during what began as a long and lonely hour of prayer, I heard in faith Jesus Christ say, ‘For love of you I left my Father’s side. I came to you who ran from me, fled me, who did not want to hear my name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of **the cross.**’

These words are burned on my life. Whether I am in a state of grace or disgrace, elation or depression, that night of fire quietly burns on. I looked at the crucifix for a long time, figuratively saw the blood streaming from every pore of his body, and heard the cry of his wounds: **‘This isn’t a joke. It is not a laughing matter to me that I have loved you.’** The longer I looked, the more I realized that no man has ever loved me and no one ever **could love me as he did.** I went out of the cave, stood on the precipice, and shouted into the darkness, ‘Jesus, are

you crazy? Are you out of your mind to have loved me so much?' I learned that night what a wise old man had told me years earlier: 'Only the one who has experienced it can know what the love of Jesus Christ is. Once you have experienced it, nothing else in the world will seem more beautiful or desirable.'

And every day, He continues to forgive you, to show mercy to you. He sees you as His perfect child. He gives you undeserved gift after undeserved gift. And one day He will take you to be with Him forever and put a final end to all your suffering.

According to Jesus in Luke 7, **your love for God is indicative of whether or not you have been forgiven, or of your understanding of God's forgiveness over you.** A lack of love towards God could be a sign that you do not understand the depth of forgiveness you have received, that perhaps that you don't even know God or have never been saved.

If you don't love God, ask Him to show you His love. At its heart, this thing that we are doing is not about rule following, or finding your purpose, or enjoying a community of loving friends, or serving others, as important as all those things might be. In the end, it is about a relationship of love with the one who created you and died for you and saved you. Do you love Him? Or do you just believe in Him?

Let this be our prayer today:

Ephesians 3:17–19 - I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

2) **How much have you been forgiven?**

If the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, and the key to loving God is knowing how much you've been forgiven, then how much have you been forgiven?

Again, I would imagine that some of you instinctively can call to mind so many sins, so much guilt, so many things that you have done that have been forgiven by your gracious God. And others of you, you don't see yourself as much of a sinner. Maybe you grew up in a Christian home, gave your life to Jesus as a 7-year-old, and never really strayed. Maybe you have been jealous when others give

testimonies about the great sins they have committed and how Jesus saved them, while your testimony is, well, kind of boring. Maybe you've wondered if you need to go out and do some crazy things, sleep around or rob a bank or get drunk, just so you can have a more exciting testimony. Maybe you're like Simon, and you don't love much because you feel like you haven't done much that needs to be forgiven.

But here's the irony. Simon knows that this woman is a sinner, a woman who had lived a sinful life, and he sees himself as the good religious Pharisee. **But this passage reveals that Simon is just as full of sin: judgmentalism, lack of hospitality, lack of love, pride.** The irony is that she is called the woman who lived a sinful life, and he is called the Pharisee, but the truth is that he is the man who has lived a sinful life. And the fact that he is blind to it just makes it worse.

I used to think I was a good person who Jesus chose for his team. It wasn't until a few years later that I truly understood the sin part, and how I was a sinner saved by the undeserved grace of God. God showed me that even in my most holy moments, I was so full of sin and self-centeredness. Even my righteous acts are like filthy rags.

Isaiah 64:6 - All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

Some of you are like me. Others, however, know you are a sinner but don't believe you've been forgiven. But John tells us this truth:

1 John 1:8-9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The gospel is that Jesus died for your sins. All of them.

Romans 8:1-2 - Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

If you don't feel like you've been forgiven much, **the good news is that you don't need to go out and rob a bank.** We've all been forgiven a lot, but not all of us know that. **Why not? Most of us self-justify all the time – it's my parents' fault. The alcohol. My circumstances.** We explain, excuse, and blame others because we're afraid that we are worthless. Our capacity for self-justification is limitless. No –

this is who you are. You can be honest about it. But when we look at the holiness of God – like in the Sermon on the Mount – we see just how far short we have fallen, how full of self-centeredness we really are. Like an HDTV, the Spirit reveals all our imperfections. Even our most holy acts are full of self-centeredness.

But then we see that Christ saw us at our worst and willingly died for us.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no **sin to be sin for us**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The good news is that the gospel of forgiveness frees us from the need to self-justify, for we have been declared righteous apart from our performance. So we can be honest about ourselves, honest about our failings. And when we are, we realize just how short we fall of God's holy standard. We realize the depth of our sin and the greatness of God's forgiveness. **And we know that if we sin, all we do is magnify the forgiveness and grace of God, that He could love and forgive someone as sinful as me.**

He who has been forgiven much loves much.

3) Do you love – or judge - others?

Look at the difference between Jesus and the Pharisee in how they treat the woman in their midst. She is a woman who has lived a sinful life. A judgmental, Pharisaical spirit is a sign that you don't understand the depth of your sin. If you did, you would realize you are in no position to sit in judgment on another person. **A lack of love for others, and instead a judgmental spirit**, could be because you do not realize how deeply you've been forgiven. **Or, a separatist attitude** – thinking that we need to erect boundaries to keep the “impure” people out – could be because you do not realize the depth of your own sin, and that no amount of separation from others can separate you from the sin in your own heart. As Jesus said:

Matthew 7:1–5 - “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”

Forgiveness leads to love. Consider the truths of that in marriage, parenthood, with your parents, or with your friends – love grows with forgiveness. Seeing your sins forgiven, being given a fresh start, can help love to grow.

When they come to our church, are people going to find Jesus or a bunch of Pharisees? Are we guilty of drawing up boundaries and deciding who is in and who is out? Or like Jesus, do we cross boundaries in order to love others? Many Christians, with good motives, just like the Pharisees, are guilty of condemning instead of loving others. May we not be like the Pharisees, of whom Jesus said in **Matthew 23:13**: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”

No matter who you are, you are welcome here. As you come seeking for Jesus, just as she did, you will not be met by Pharisees here, but by people who have been forgiven much and therefore love much.