

This morning, I am continuing in my summer series, The Power of One Life, looking at minor Biblical characters and what we can learn from their lives about knowing God. This morning we'll be in Luke 7:36-50, looking at a nameless person who is called "a woman who had lived a sinful life." We'll go through the passage a little at a time.

Luke 7:36-50 - Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸ and 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."

Stop there. What is going on here? Let me give some background.

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 **pure and faithful to God's law, separate from pagan influences**. One of the reasons for this focus on purity was so Israel could maintain their Jewish identity and hopefully achieve freedom from the Roman oppression. They believed that the Messiah would liberate the Jewish people from their Roman oppressors, but that he would not come until the people were pure. So, they tried to steadfastly keep all of God's rules from the Old Testament, and even added more in order to help the Jewish people maintain their purity. The laws were boundary markers, keeping pure people in and impure people out. **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 they 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 ways 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 (they did not sit on chairs), 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 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 a deliberate attempt by Simon and the other Pharisees 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 happy invitation, 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 in the crowd, there is 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 actions 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) Women were not allowed to touch men who were not their husbands, and here she was touching a religious teacher.
- 2) Her jar of alabaster perfume is most likely from her trade, a sign of her immorality
- 3) She lets her hair down – 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 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 men 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 canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "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-- for she loved much. But he who 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 is willing to forgive her. He 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 came and broke 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.

1) How much do you love God?

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 you don't even know God or have never been saved.

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

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.

It's not just believe in God, but 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.

Remember, even the demons believe in God. But to love God is something completely different. If you don't love God, ask Him to help you learn what it means to love Him.

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?

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. 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.

Maybe you are more like Simon. Maybe you say, well, I haven't done that many horrible things in my life, and I don't feel like I've done much that needs to be forgiven. But this passage reveals that Simon is full of sin: judgmentalism, lack of hospitality, lack of love, pride, 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.

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, Pharasaic 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.

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 kingdom of heaven in men'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.