



GRACE CHURCH

Welcoming Jesus

Luke 7:36-8:3

Grace Waco | 2.18.24

Answer this ice-breaker question for yourself: if I told you that you could meet, shake hands with, and even sit down for dinner with, anyone in history, who would it be? Who piques your curiosity? Whose mind would you like to search? Whose advice would you like to have? Now what if I told you that I could offer not simply dinner with this individual, but could be their friend, their confidant, that you could be open and intimate with them? Does this change who you choose? Does it change how you approach them? It should. To approach with curiosity in order to learn and gain from someone great is a far different matter than to approach them with a desire for intimacy.

Now a follow up question. If I told you that you could meet, shake hands with, and even sit down for dinner with, face-to-face, in the flesh, the Triune God of the universe, creator and sustainer of all things—what would you want to ask him? But what if I told you I could not just offer dinner but intimacy, confidence, and friendship? What changes?

Now one last question: Do you even *want* intimacy with the living God?

This is the question of our text. In our Equipping Hour class we have been asking how we can treat Jesus not just as an idea, but as a real person. But isn't it far easier to be *curious* about God than to have a *relationship* with God?

Last week we talked about how it is natural to doubt Jesus—but we must bring our doubts *to* Jesus. We must approach him on his terms. True faith in Jesus is moving beyond the idea of God as something we are interested in into the person of God as someone we are intimate with. Of course, this kind of intimacy requires a degree of *certainty*. No wise person says “I do” on their wedding day, opening themselves to that kind of intimacy, without some sense of certainty and trust. But that is what the gospel of Luke is written for: so we can be sure about Jesus.

What would it look like if we *really* believed Jesus? In our story today we find the answer in two different, contrasting examples: one of Simon the Pharisee, and one of the sinful woman of the city.

Simon invites Jesus to speak at his event, but the woman invites herself to weep at Jesus' feet. One is religion masquerading as faith, the other is true faith found only in desperation. What I want for



our church is to be a church of true faith—*certainty*—in Jesus, that allows us to not just be curious about the idea of God but intimate with the person of God. So let's examine these two examples now, and then let's see how we can grow the kind of faith that is commended by Jesus.

Inviting Jesus to Speak vs Weeping at Jesus' Feet

The key to interpreting this passage is noticing the subtle hints about the host of this dinner. **Verse 36** identifies him as “one of the Pharisees”, but we know his name is “Simon” based on how Jesus addresses him in **verse 40**. There is some debate as to whether this story in Luke is the same as the stories of a woman named Mary of Bethany or also named as Mary Magdalene, who you may know, found in Mark, Matthew, and John. There are similarities between these stories, but I believe this is a different account. Here it occurs far earlier in the narrative, the man hosting is a Pharisee, and the anointing is done on the feet, not the head, of Jesus. The more important point is *why* Luke includes this unique story. The point is clear at the end of the story, **verse 50**, where Jesus commends this outcast woman's faith—similarly to how he does so with the centurion earlier in chapter 7—as over and above the “greatest” in Israel. Luke is teaching us a story about true faith.

The kind of feast that Jesus is invited into is a common one, and would be the kind of feast where Jesus, as the guest, would be invited to do some sort of teaching or presentation after dinner. This is why Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus—to hear more of his teaching. Up to this point, the Pharisees are skeptical about Jesus because of his “eating and drinking with sinners”, so this is an opportunity for Simon to set the parameters. The guests would be “reclining at table”, as in **verse 36**, meaning their feet were away from the table behind them.

But what Simon does not anticipate is that although he has invited Jesus into his home, he cannot stop who associates with Jesus. See, these kinds of feasts would be open air, essentially so that the public could come and hear the teaching of the special guest. So while this woman was not invited by Simon, something about Jesus had drawn her in.

Before we can evaluate Simon, we have to understand a bit more of what is going on here. The text in **verse 37** calls this woman “a woman of the city” which is an interesting way to describe her. But she is also called “a sinner”. It's not entirely clear what Luke has in mind—likely a prostitute, or a serial adulteress, some kind of homewrecker, but no matter what, it isn't good. The sin that she has committed in the past has made her unclean and unfit for worship. And what she does, which we will get to more in a minute, is incredibly shocking. She sneaks up to Jesus, weeps over him, lets down her hair—which was a sign of openness and intimacy reserved normally only for husbands and wives, you could literally be tried for adultery and killed if you did this in public—anoints his feet by breaking this small jar around her neck, and kisses him.

What is so fascinating about this scene, once we understand the stakes, is that it's as if Jesus doesn't notice. No note is made about Jesus being surprised. He doesn't address the woman at all,



not yet. He just allows her to weep at his feet, totally invading his space, with no comment to send her away. It's in **Verse 39**, the person who "sees" this is Simon.

This theme of "seeing" is all over Luke. Remember the widow of Nain who Jesus "sees" in the crowd? It is a clue to the theme of prophecy. Prophets were those who spoke from God, who "saw" God and were able to "see" people and bring God's word to them. Simon knows this, which is why he judges Jesus in **verse 39**. The irony here is that Simon is acting like a prophet, thinking he "sees" Jesus and the woman, but he truly sees neither. He is blinded by his judgment of the woman. He judges the woman to be just a sinner, unworthy of Jesus, and he judges Jesus to be blind. In reality, Jesus sees both the woman's sin and Simon's hypocritical judgment.

In **verse 40** he calls Jesus "teacher"—nothing inherently wrong in that—but it's a sign of intellectual respect. It is not "Lord". In fact, he doesn't give Jesus the respect that would be normal for an honored rabbi: washing his feet and anointing him, and a kiss, the greeting of friends. He fails to see Jesus for who he really is. But the most important thing to note about Simon is not that he fails to see Jesus truly or sees others truly, it's that he fails to see himself clearly.

Simon has no desperation. His interest in Jesus comes from a place of comfort, not need. He has walked himself straight into the woes of Luke 6. "Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." Without any desperation, Simon is not hungry enough for Jesus. Looking at the speck in his sister's eye, he cannot see the log in his own.

Simon suffers from what author David Zahl has called "High Anthropology". An anthropology, in this context, is just your view of humanity.

Anthropologies can be charted on a continuum from high to low. Think of it as a barometer of human potential. On the "high" end, we find sunnier estimations of what women and men are like. We run into grander visions of human enterprise. The higher we get, the more optimistic the assumptions... Graduation speeches may be ground zero [for high anthropology]... Apple guru Steve Jobs drew on the high side of the scale for such an occasion: 'Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition; he told graduates. 'They somehow know what you truly want to become.'

In other words, Simon looks outwardly good. If he screws up, no one really knows. And so his assumption is that failure and weakness is abnormal, to be shunned, to be judged. Of course Simon has doubts, of course Simon has sin, but let's not focus on that. Ultimately, Simon's view of humanity is a spiritual one. Because he sees the ideal or norm of humanity as being grand and achievable, he begins to believe that God thinks the way he does. That the kingdom of God is for winners.



If what Simon is doing is simply inviting Jesus to speak, almost like a garnish on his self-sufficiency, the sinful woman's perspective could not be any more different. Not only is she risking her safety in doing this for Jesus, by breaking the alabaster jar around her neck, it is likely she is giving up her livelihood and her way of life completely. That jar is her most prized possession, a status symbol, a way to attract men. Without it, she is undesirable, unwanted. And she lays it down at Jesus' feet. It's all she has, and she wants Jesus to have it. She lets her hair down—something she would only do with her clients if she is a prostitute.

Why does she weep? It's likely because she has heard Jesus' teaching about forgiveness, she has been following him, and she believes him. She has believed this incredible news that she is not too far from the kingdom. She believes it so much that she wishes to give herself over to Jesus, to let her hair down.

How is this kind of uninhibited desire for intimacy with Jesus possible? Unlike Simon, this woman has a more realistic view of herself, of humanity, and ultimately of God. She has a "low anthropology".

On the "low" end of the spectrum tend to sit the more sober estimations. We find understandings of human spirit as something that veers, by default, in a malign direction, and as a result, cannot flourish without assistance or restraint.¹

Jesus' story to Simon affirms this. In the story of the debtors, Simon understands that he is the one who has been "forgiven little". Now, in reality, who is a worse sinner: Simon, or the woman lost in sexual sin? The answer is that both are equally sinful. Every sin is an affront against God. James says in James 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it." The difference between Simon and the woman is not their guilt, it's their understanding of forgiveness. The difference is that Simon sees himself as a relative success with just a little bad, and the woman sees herself as entirely a failure in need of mercy to survive.

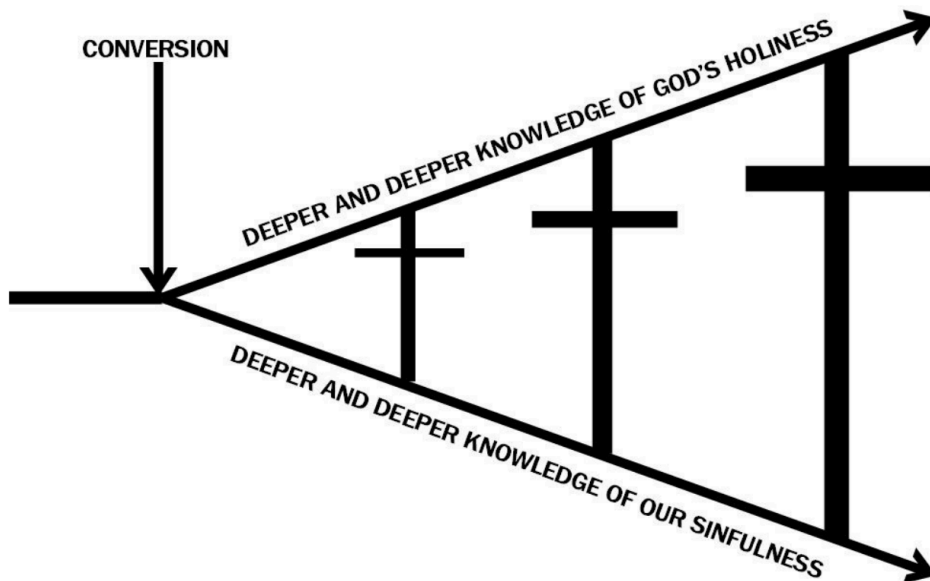
It's easy to see Simon's self-righteousness. It's harder to see our own. But self-righteousness occurs anytime we begin to either lower God's standards of holiness, or pretend that we aren't that sinful. This is what Simon is doing: he lower's Christ's standards to a bar he can meet: outward appearance of holiness, law-keeping, intellectual curiosity of Jesus. And so now he can pretend to meet those standards.

Expanding the Gospel vs. Shrinking the Gospel

¹ David Zahl, *Low Anthropology*



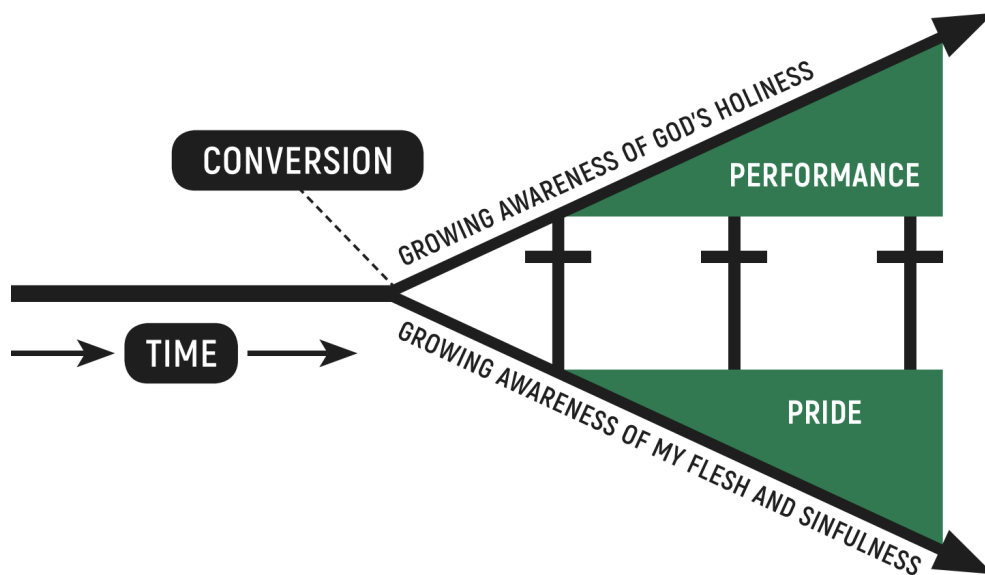
Some friends of mine, Will Walker and Bob Thune, co-authored a helpful book a while back called *The Gospel-Centered Life* in which they popularized an evangelistic tool known as the “cross chart”. The idea is very simple.



At the time of our conversion, we tend to have a general view of God's holiness, and a general view of our sinfulness. They aren't so far apart. Far apart enough to know that we need the cross to bridge the gap, we need Christ to help us. But as we mature in Christian faith, that gap should grow bigger: a greater understanding of God's holiness and our sinfulness. In other words, our anthropology should get lower. And what then happens is that the cross of Christ should get bigger and bigger, more magnificent and glorious.

But often what we struggle with as Christians is that, like Simon, while it is inevitable to begin to see God's holiness more and our sinfulness more, instead of growing our vision of Jesus and his death and resurrection to meet the gap, we fill in the gap by lowering God's standards and trying to work for his favor, or by pretending we really aren't that bad.





When faced with the reality of God’s holiness in the person of Jesus and the reality of her own sin, this woman diminishes neither. She does not try to perform for Jesus, she knows and truly believes she cannot meet his standard. Instead of diminishing his holiness like Simon, she honors him as holy by anointing his feet and washing his feet, welcoming him as Lord. Instead of pretending she has little or no guilt to be forgiven, she embraces her sinfulness before God. In turn, the magnitude of Jesus’ love expands in her heart to the point of weeping—and she walks away completely free and forgiven.

What is so shocking about this forgiveness is that in order to receive it, you must think very highly of Jesus. Jesus tells her “you are forgiven”, but what right does he have? She didn’t sin against him. N. T. Wright (a British scholar) says that Jesus’ forgiveness of the woman is like “a private individual approaching a prisoner in a jail and offering him a royal pardon, signed by himself.”²

This is what is so amazing about this woman’s faith—she believed Jesus had so much authority that he could forgive sins, *really* believed it to be true, the authority of the king of the universe, and yet instead of backing away from that authority or hiding from it or keeping her distance, she also had faith enough to approach Jesus.

In Chapter 8:1-3, we find the story of several amazing women who followed Jesus. They were influential women, wealthy women, and completely transformed women. Most of all, they were women who loved Jesus greatly. Why? In those days, women weren’t believed, they weren’t included. In the intro to her fantastic book *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, Rebecca Mchluaghin writes how the false account of Jesus called the Gospel of Mary tells the story of how Mary shares

² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*



with the disciples how Jesus spoke to her, and they don't believe her—Peter accuses her of lying. And Mary weeps. But it's a false gospel—the disciples believed women because Jesus did. See, Jesus saw those no one else did. He came for the sick, the outcast, those who have been mistreated or overlooked or left-behind.

Do you even want intimacy with the living God? The answer will depend on the amount of your love, which depends on your understanding of forgiveness, which depends on your realization of your own sin.

Jesus came for sinners, so that in being forgiven much, they might love much. And friends, we are great sinners—but we have a great Savior. Only when we realize the great depths of our sin will we realize the great depths Jesus went to forgive us. We must be willing to weep at Jesus' feet, to be considered a great sinner by all, to mine the depths of our dark hearts. Only then will we feel the great love of God, that great love of God that bids us not just come and have a conversation with God, pick his brain, ask him questions, but that love that bids us to lay down our very life at his feet, sit close to him, share secrets with him, and enjoy the freedom of his forgiveness forever.

