

Dinner With Jesus
Can You Say “Grace”?
March 13, 2022

Good morning everyone.

It’s great to have you with us whether you’re here on campus or joining us online as we continue in our series *Dinner With Jesus*.

As I said last week, I’m very excited about this series because I love stories about Jesus.

And what we’re looking at in this series are stories about Jesus hanging out with people and interacting with them.

- Having conversations with them
- Asking questions
- Answering questions.

And when you see Him do that – actually, when you see *anyone* hang out with and interact with others, you get a pretty good sense of what they're all about.

And that's what happens with Jesus. In these stories, we get to see Jesus of Nazareth as He really is ...

... which leads to the second thing I'm excited about ...

... which is that Jesus, as He really is, isn't what people *expect* ... whether it's people living in the first century land of Palestine or in the 21st century Northland of Kansas City.

Again and again, Jesus blows up everyone's preconceived notions of what a *Messiah* ought to be and, more importantly, everyone's idea of what *God* ought to be – and is.

And that's going to happen again today as we pick up the story recorded for us by Luke ...

... who, remember, was *not Jewish* and *not a follower* of Jesus but *became* a follower of Jesus – a Christian – not long after the events he describes in his Gospel.

Because of his inquisitive nature and his scientific background (Luke was a physician) ...

He carefully researched the story of Jesus' life and ministry and wrote it down so that other people who were *not Jewish* and *not there* – like you and me – could know about it.

Anyway, in Luke Chapter 7, which is where we began last Sunday ...

Jesus has just finished a discussion with some of the disciples of John the Baptist who, as you may remember, was not only Jesus' cousin ...

... but also the guy who had this “big tent revival” gig out in the desert announcing ...

- The imminent arrival of the Messiah
- And that everyone had better “repent and produce ‘fruit’ in keeping with that repentance!”

In other words, “get your act together because God’s about to do something!”

And one day when Jesus goes out to see John, John sees the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove and he hears a voice from Heaven say, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him.”ⁱ

So, he knows that Jesus is the One they’ve been waiting for.

But Jesus doesn’t do “Messiah” in the way that John expects.

Instead of coming with “a winnowing fork in his hands, separating the wheat from the chaff” (metaphorically speaking) ...

In Jesus' own words ...

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking ... Luke 7:34 (NIV)

The Son of Man – God in the flesh, the Messiah of Israel – came not with a closed fist and a closed heart but with open hands and an open heart ...

... gathered around a table ...

- With real people ...
- With real hopes and dreams ...
- With real challenges and concerns.

Nine times in the story that Luke tells, Jesus is at a table having dinner ... leading some to remark that Jesus literally eats his way from one story to the next!

And over the next several weeks – from now through Easter – we’re going to look at what Jesus says and does at some of those meals ...

... beginning today with the one that happens immediately following this discussion of Jesus’ surprising method of engaging with people.

The Uninvited Guest

Luke writes ...

*When one of the Pharisees
invited Jesus to have dinner with
him ... Luke 7:36 (NIV)*

Let’s stop there for a minute and talk about the Pharisees

You know that song the band did a few minutes ago?

“Sign, sign everywhere a sign” telling everyone to “do this and not do that”?

The Pharisees were the ones who put up those signs.

But they weren’t trying to be jerks. They did it because they cared very deeply about the safety and future of their country.

See, they believed that the reason the Roman Empire was occupying their land and oppressing their people was because the people had fallen away from obeying God’s Law given to Moses.

So, they were on a campaign to clean up the country so that God’s blessing would returnⁱⁱ through the promised Messiah.

Anyway, Luke writes that ...

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him ...

Jesus accepted the invitation.

... he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

Luke 7:36 (NIV)

... which to us sounds a little weird because when we eat at a table, we pull up a chair and slide in close.

They didn't do it that way.

Instead, there would be a low table on which food was served and everyone would lie around it on cushions or pillows.

It's called a "triclinium."

“Tri” meaning three and “clinium” meaning to recline.

So, it was a three-sided table which allowed servants to come into the middle section to serve the meal.

And everyone’s feet would be extended out away from the table, which is important to understand for is about to happen in this story.

So ...

- Jesus comes to this Pharisee’s house. (Actually, his name is Simon but, for some reason, Luke doesn’t name him just yet).
- And Jesus, like everyone else, is laying down sort of on top of the table, with his feet sticking out behind him, away from the table.

And Luke says that ...

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.

Luke 7:37 (NIV)

Now, a couple of things to note about this.

1. Luke writes that she lived “a sinful life” but he doesn’t tell us what that “sinfulness” is, although most biblical scholars believe she was or had been a prostitute.
2. Since she *learned* about Jesus’ being at the Pharisee’s house, she had not been *invited* to the Pharisee’s house.

Ok, so ...

A Pharisee invites Jesus for dinner and Jesus accepts the invitation.

And a woman in that town who lived a sinful life finds out that Jesus is having dinner at this Pharisee's house, so she comes to the house with a jar of perfume.

And ...

As she stood behind him at his feet ... Luke 7:38 (NIV)

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute, Luke!

You're saying that this woman didn't come to the house just to drop off some perfume? That she is actually *at the table* where Jesus is?

How did *that* happen? How did she get in?

Well, back in that day and time – and it's still this way in a lot of the places that are more patriarchal, and where the climate is temperate enough ...

A wealthy person's home typically had wall around it with an entryway that led into an open courtyard.

And during the daytime, when that entryway was open, anyone could come in.

And what they would find was, again, an open courtyard.

And this is where little kids from the neighborhood would come and play with your kids.

This is where the UPS driver drops off your Amazon boxes and where the pizza guy delivers the pizza that you'll eat in the dining room near the back where there's a triclinium set up.

So, basically what happens is that ...

- This "sinful woman" comes into the courtyard, which really wasn't that out of the norm ...

- And she's able to see where Jesus is at the table eating with the Pharisee and his Pharisee friends ...
- But instead of handing the jar of perfume to one of the servants ...
- She goes up to the table and stands directly behind Jesus at his feet.

Got the picture?

Scandalous

Alright, let's continue.

Luke writes ...

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.

Luke 7:38 (NIV)

And *that* most definitely is *not* the norm.

It's kind of weird. Actually ... it *is* weird.

Because it's not like she's just shedding a tear or two. This woman is blubbering so much that Jesus' feet become wet enough that she feels the need to dry them off ...

... which I think clues us into something that's not specifically stated in Luke's recounting of the event.

And that is that this is not the first time this woman has seen Jesus or heard of him.ⁱⁱⁱ

There was history here, even if they had never talked one on one or met face-to-face.

See, at this point in Jesus' ministry ...

- He had already gained the dubious (in that culture) reputation of being a friend of tax collectors, prostitutes, and other notorious sinners.
- He had already been labeled as “a glutton and a drunkard” for sitting at a table with people of questionable backgrounds.

And I suspect that at some point, she had heard about that.

I suspect that at some point, she had stood on the edge of the crowd and listened as Jesus proclaimed ...

- “The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.”

- “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Maybe she'd even heard Jesus tell the story of the prodigal son. You know the one where ...

- The kid makes a mess of things
- Runs away from home
- Burns through the family cash
- And comes back in rags with nothing to his name.

But, instead of having him stoned (as the Law of Moses allowed), his dad hugs his neck and throws a welcome home party!

Luke doesn't recount that story until later in his Gospel (chapter 15) ...

... but it's possible that was a picture of grace that Jesus painted over and over and over again as he spoke in different towns and villages about the heart of God, the grace and mercy of God.

Regardless of how it had happened, at some point this “woman who lived a sinful life” had heard the message of Jesus and she understood that he was speaking *of* her and *to* her.

And she believed Him.

And for the first time, maybe ever, she felt valued and loved and clean.

And I think she said to herself, “if ever I get a chance to thank him ... If ever I get a chance to thank him ...”

And *then* she hears that Jesus is in *her* town, and that Jesus is in *that* house – Simon the Pharisee's

house.

And in spite of “who she is,” she takes a huge risk and brings an expensive jar of perfume as something of an offering to the person who had set her free from sin and condemnation.

That’s what’s going on here behind the scenes.

So, even though it’s kind of weird, it actually makes sense.

But what’s going on here is more than just weird. It’s actually *scandalous*.

Because for her to do what she was doing, she had to get *down on her knees behind* Jesus ...

... which, in that culture, violated every convention about “social distancing” between men and women.

Furthermore – and let me show you a picture

so you'll understand the significance.

What do you notice about those women?

Their heads are covered because, for centuries, that's what women have done in Middle Eastern cultures ...

AND ... that's what they did in first-century Palestine where Jesus lived.

In fact, in Jesus' day, some Jewish men never saw their wives' hair until their wedding night!

So, for this woman to dry Jesus' feet with her hair, meant that she would have uncovered it in public, which was scandalous because it was *way too intimate*.

And wiping Jesus' feet with her hair? That had *way too many sexual overtones*.

Clearly, it was not *intended* to be sexual.

But her behavior was crossing a line any way you look at it. It was scandalous.

But just as scandalous is the fact that Jesus doesn't push her away!

He doesn't react in anger like the Pharisees would.

He doesn't *act at all* like they would expect someone to act if He truly was who He claimed to be – “the Son of Man,” the long-awaited deliverer of Israel.

... which, as it turns out, is exactly what the Pharisee who had invited Jesus is thinking.

Luke writes ...

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this ...

... when he saw what the woman was doing and how Jesus was reacting (or not reacting) ...

... 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." Luke 7:39 (NIV)

... with the implication being ... "and he most certainly would not let her do it."

See his logic here?

"A holy man from God would not let a sinner touch him, therefore, he must not be a holy man from God."

But instead of debating his logic, Jesus takes things in a completely different direction.

Jesus seems to do that a lot.

Luke writes ...

Jesus answered him ...

... which is easy to skip over in our haste to what Jesus is going to say as his answer. But don't miss the irony here.

“Jesus can't be a prophet,” the Pharisee thinks, “because he obviously doesn't know the woman is a sinner.”

And yet he knows the thoughts of this guy well enough to answer them!

I just think that's funny.

Anyway ...

Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said. Luke 7:40 (NIV)

... which I suspect is said with at least a hint of mockery because Simon clearly does not believe Jesus is much of anything, let alone a rabbi or teacher.

A Lesson on Debt

So, Jesus says to him ...

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.” Luke 7:41 (NIV)

Now, back in the day, if you needed to borrow money, you didn't go to a bank or a credit union.

You went to a person who either *had* a lot of money or had *access to* a lot of money.

And both of the people in Jesus' story had done that. One borrowed 50 denarii and the other

500.

Now, a denarius (singular) was a small silver coin representing a day's pay for a laborer.

- A denarius is what you make if you go into someone's field and pull weeds all day.
- It's what you make if you go into someone's orchard and help them pick their crop all day.

So, if one denarius is a day's pay, 50 denarii would be roughly two months of labor with a few days off.

And 500 denarii would be like two *years* of work with a few days off.

So, this is how Jesus sets up the story.

Two people need money, so they go to a

moneylender.

One of them borrows 500 silver coins. One of them borrows 50 coins ... which, for both, are big money.

We've not talking trivial amounts here.

But there's a problem, Jesus says.

*"Neither of them had the money
to pay him back ... Luke 7:42*

So, the moneylender had to decide what to do.

Well, if you're a typical moneylender, what you do when someone can't pay what they owe is apply pressure.

You say "OK, you can't pay me back the money, so I'm taking your property, I'm taking your farm implements."

“You’ve got two teenage sons who will work for me until your debts are paid off.”

And if that doesn’t work, I’ll be taking what you owe out of your kneecaps.

If you’re a typical moneylender, you apply pressure.

However, in Jesus’ parable, this particular moneylender is not typical.

“Neither of them had the money to pay him back,” Jesus said ...

... so he forgave the debts of both.” *Luke 7:42 (NIV)*

... which is a really bad business model if you think about it because, it’s not like the debt goes nowhere. It’s not like it magically disappears.

Instead, the moneylender absorbs the loss. He’s the one who ultimately makes the payment for

them.

And then Jesus – as only Jesus can do – gets to the heart of the matter with a question.

“Simon,” Jesus asks ...

*“Now which of them will love
him more?”* *Luke 7:42*
(NIV)

... which is kind of odd because you might expect him to ask, “which one will be more *grateful?*”

But that’s not what Jesus asks. It’s “which one will *love* him more?”

I mean, we’re talking about a moneylender here. And you don’t *love* a moneylender.

So, Jesus is painting the picture of a strong over-the-top kind of response, kind of like the response of the woman at His feet.

Luke tells us that ...

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." Luke 7:43 (NIV)

And you can just hear his disdain for Jesus dripping in his answer can't you?

"I suppose."

What do you mean you "suppose"?

The answer is obvious! There's no need to "suppose."

But Jesus ignores the insult and says ...

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Luke 7:43 (NIV)

The one who will love him more is the one that's been forgiven more.

And remember that the whole time this discussion is going on, there is a blubbering woman kneeling behind Jesus, crying, and dumping perfume on his feet.

And at this point ...

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

"Of course, I can, Jesus. How can I miss her?"

"Simon," Jesus said ...

"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.

"You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I

entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.

“You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.”

Luke 7:44-46 (NIV)

And, just so you'll know, all of those things Jesus pointed out that Simon did not do were just customary behaviors of the day.

In other words ...

- Providing water for a guest to wash their feet ...
- Greeting them with a peck on the cheek
- And putting a little oil on their head when they entered.

That's just what you did if you had any level of

respect for your guest and any level of *graciousness* as a host.

It wasn't going above and beyond to do those things.

And Simon had done none of them for Jesus.

And yet, he is sitting in condemnation of both Jesus and this woman who *had* gone above and beyond.

- She didn't give Jesus water. She gave him her tears.
- And she didn't kiss Jesus' cheek. She kissed his feet.
- And she didn't use common household oil. She used expensive perfume.

"It's not even her house," Jesus was saying, "and

she has been a far better host than you.”

And then comes the punchline, the lesson that Jesus really wants to get across to Simon.

“I tell you, Simon ...”

“Her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown.

*But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” Luke 7:47
(NIV)*

Wow. Wow.

“Whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

In fact, would you read that line out loud with me?

“Whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

What an amazing observation.

In fact, if you were to boil this lesson down into a little formula ...

... it might look like this:

Big forgiveness = big love.

Little forgiveness = little love.

Whoever has been forgiven much, loves much.
Whoever's forgiven little, loves little.

Big forgiveness, big love. Little forgiveness, little love.

And that was the difference between Simon and this unexpected and uninvited guest – this “sinful woman.”

- Her sins were many, but she had been forgiven.

- He was still in debt, unforgiven, and he didn't even know it.
- She had eyes to see.
- And he was still blind.

The Response

Now, we know how the story ends for the woman.

Luke tells us that Jesus finally speaks to her directly.

Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Luke 7:48-49 (NIV)

... which was obviously not intended as a compliment.

It was yet another expression of disdain for Jesus; a way of saying “who does this guy think he is??”

So, why did Jesus do it? Why did he say this to her?

After all, he'd already told Simon that her sins *had been* forgiven, past tense.

It's not like he was forgiving her at that moment, or again.

When Jesus looked in her eyes and told her *directly* that she was forgiven, I think he was saying to her ...

“When you heard about me, when you stood on the edge of the crowd and wondered if what I was saying was somehow, someway true even

for someone like *you* ... it was. And it is.”

“It’s all true. You heard me right. You heard me correctly.”

*Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”
Luke 7:50 (NIV)*

“Be assured that what I’ve told is true.”

And I have to believe that there are at least a few of us in this room or watching online who are wondering the same thing she wondered when she first heard about Jesus.

“Am I too far gone? Have I committed the unpardonable sin (whatever that is)?”

If you’re still breathing, the answer to both is no.

Maybe you’re wondering “Do I have to clean up

my act and make myself more acceptable in some way?”

Again, the answer is no. Jesus says to you what He said to her. Your faith in *him* – believing He is who He said He was – is all it takes to find forgiveness of all sin, past, present, future, known and unknown.

Of course, knowing who all is in this room and watching online I’m pretty sure that there are many more of us who are like Simon than the woman in this story.

So, how does he respond?

We don’t know. Luke doesn’t tell us.

But I’m going to make a wild guess and say, “*not positively.*”

After all ...

- Jesus had willingly allowed the rules of table fellowship and purity to be violated.
- And then he got in Simon's face over his lack of hospitality.
- And then Jesus compared him to a prostitute and the prostitute ranked higher.

So, I'm going to guess that the offense Simon felt initially at the presence of the woman only grew the more that Jesus spoke.

And that's because Simon was blind to his own sinfulness. He didn't think he needed to be forgiven of very much.

Whoever has been forgiven much, loves much.
Whoever's forgiven little, loves little.

So, let's talk for a few minutes about big

forgiveness and little forgiveness.^{iv}

When we look at the crucifixion of Jesus, most people would say “I get it, I get it. When Jesus died on the cross, he died to pay off debts of sin that were not his. He came to personally absorb the loss.”

“So, I get it. Jesus died so that my sins would be forgiven.”

OK, but which ones?

“Well, all of them such as ... well ... hmmm ...”

“I know that sin means to fall short and miss the mark. I know that I’m made for more and that I am always falling short of the more I was made for.”

“So, I agree that I am a sinner but, honestly, *I’m just not that good at it*. Other people *excel* at sin, but I really don’t.”

“So, in my heart of hearts, while I know that Jesus came to die for my sins, I honestly believe that my sins are kind of little and that they are few, especially compared to a whole bunch of other people I know.”

Of course, if we believe that, there is a high probability that we will view our forgiveness as little ... which explains why so many of us have so little love for God and others.

And as Jesus said, “little forgiveness, little love.”

So, you’re saying, Rick, that we ought to go out and *sin big* so that we can have big forgiveness and big love?

Not exactly.

Instead, what we need to do is better grasp of what sin – our sin – really is.

After all the problem with Simon was that because his sin wasn't as obvious as that of the prostitute at his table ...

Because his sin wasn't as blatant and obvious, he was blind to the fact that, in the sight of God, he, too, was in deep weeds!

To use the terms of Jesus' parable, she might have owed 500 denarii – which was a lot.

But he owed at least 50 – which was also a lot.

So, let's try to get a better sense of what sin – our sin – really is.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a commentary about this story that asked, “What would it look like if Christians were to spend some time focusing on the ‘forgive us our debts’ part of the Lord's Prayer?”

And I thought that was a pretty good idea, so we're going to try a little experiment here this

morning which will probably be a little uncomfortable but also, hopefully, get the point across.

And what we're going to do is I'm going to read a list of sins and I would like for all of us to respond with the same sentence whether or not you think you've personally committed any of these sins.

And the sentence is the part of the Lord's Prayer that goes "Forgive us our debts."

Let's just practice that phrase.

Ready?

"Forgive us our debts."

So, what I'm going to do is read through a list of sins that include attitudes of the heart as well as behavior.

And after each one I'll just kind of gesture.

And then we'll all respond together, "Forgive us our debts."

Ok, here we go ...

For living in one of the wealthiest civilizations in the history of the world and always wanting more.

Forgive us our debts.

For treasuring my stuff more than I treasure my people.

Forgive us our debts.

For being capable and smart and treating as inferior, those who are less capable and less smart.

Forgive us our debts.

For sexual sins of the body and of the mind.

Forgive us our debts.

For being self-absorbed.

Forgive us our debts.

For failing to speak words of encouragement to people in desperate need of words of encouragement.

Forgive us our debts.

For minimizing my faults while maximizing the faults of others.

Forgive us our debts.

For repeating things about others that simply do not need to be repeated.

Forgive us our debts.

For assuming a pure motivation on my part while judging the motivation of others.

Forgive us our debts.

For using my humor to make someone look foolish and stupid.

Forgive us our debts.

For using my power and position to make my life easy at the expense of others.

Forgive us our debts.

For playing the victim instead of taking the responsibility that's mine.

Forgive us our debts.

Getting Personal

It's a little jarring, isn't it?

And the list could go on and on and on.

Plus, if Jesus had not met us when he did, there's no telling *how many more sins* would be on our list.

See, Jesus not only saved us from sins that we *have* committed, he's also kept us from doing some of the things that we're *capable* of; things that *we would have done* without Him.

And once you understand that ... once it becomes clear to you how far you have gone or how far you could have gone, everything begins to change ...

... because "big sin" equals "big forgiveness."

“And big forgiveness,” Jesus says, “equals big, extravagant, over-the-top love” like that of a woman who kneels to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair.

So, if you’re a Christian – if you’re someone who claims to be forgiven by Jesus because of your faith in him – what about that?

Is your love extravagant? And not just for God but other people?

When you look at the people around you, are you looking at them like Simon looked at the woman at his table?

“Thank you, God, that I’m not like them. Thank you that I’m so much better than them.”

As I look at our country these days that kind of attitude is destroying us. It’s turning friend against friend, parent against child, neighbor against neighbor.

And what's so silly about it is that we're all sinners.

Some of us are down 500 denarii and some are only down 50, but we all have a debt. We're all sinners.

And I don't know what people who aren't Christians should do about that.

But Christians, we ought to be the last people looking down on anyone else because when we truly understand the nature of sin – our sin – we have no bragging rights.

Our sin put Jesus on the cross as much as anyone else.

So, let's not forget that. Let's not forget the amazing grace that we have received not because of anything we've done because of the extravagant over-the-top love of God for sinners

like us.

Let's pray.

Endnotes

ⁱ Mark 9:7

ⁱⁱ <https://www.stevethomason.net/2017/02/19/table-sermon-luke-736-50/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Great observation from Jeff Manion of Ada Bible Church in his message, *The Unexpected Guest*, 6/23/19. His telling of this story has strongly influenced mine.

^{iv} This section credit to Jeff Manion