

6. The sinner and the self-righteous

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Luke 7:36-50

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Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly:
I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.”

— John Newton

One of my favorite children's books growing up was *Come Over To My Place* by Theo LeSieg, better known as Dr Seuss. It transports you to homes all over the world, and the different ways that people live.

And for me, that's one of the most interesting parts about travel – the insights you get into different cultures and their customs, especially when you get to stay with locals.

A few years ago my family and I went on a mission trip to Fiji, an island nation in the Pacific Ocean. It was a graduation trip for the 12th graders in our church, and a chance to experience a part of the world most of us had never seen.

The highlight was a three-day homestay in a village on a tiny, remote island. In Fiji, each village belongs to a different tribe, with a chief. So when you arrive in the village, the chief has to welcome you into the village. And there is an elaborate set of cultural ceremonies that you have to go through in order to make yourself welcome.

You have to dress respectfully. For the men, that means wearing a lava lava, a traditional Fijian style skirt. You can't carry anything in your hands, because the chief needs to see that your hands are empty – you aren't carrying a weapon. You have to approach the village in silence, and with a submissive pose. Then you have to wait for the elders to invite you into the village long house. Then there is the Kava ceremony, where one person after the next, everyone shares a drink made from a plant root that makes your tongue go numb. It's all very formal, very ceremonial, very traditional.

Of course, after the formal welcome, everybody relaxed a lot more, and we were invited to stay in people's homes, we had a great time, but that's a story for another day.

Part of our Bible story today revolves around hospitality and ceremony, and what happens when cultural boundaries are broken. But as happens so often when people have an encounter with Jesus, the outcome of the story is not what we might have expected.

So why don't we pray that God would show us the unexpected, as we open this story that is sometimes entitled 'a sinful woman anoints Jesus.'

Our heavenly Father, will you teach us today about what really matters to you. Will you reach into our hearts and consciences and stir them, by your Holy Spirit, to understand how high and wide and deep is your love for us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

So we are in the middle of our sermon series called *Encounters with Jesus*. It's all about people who met Jesus, and how their lives were changed because of it. We're also praying that each of us here will have an encounter with Jesus, through what we read in the Bible. That it won't just be about somebody else – but that we'll see ourselves in the stories and that we'll be changed by the encounter as well.

Well, our encounter with Jesus today takes place in the home of a Pharisee.

The Pharisees were the most religious of all the Jews – they prided themselves on the way they kept the Old Testament laws, they were fastidious with the ritual and ceremonial aspects of the Law. They were the religious elite of the day.

And this Pharisee invites Jesus to have dinner in his home.

[Jesus by this stage was a very well-known teacher, and he had spoken in synagogues and in public settings. Jesus was quite the celebrity, and so you can imagine the kudos you'd get from having a teacher of his status in your home. Or perhaps the Pharisee just admired Jesus – he might have been curious to know more. Whichever way,]

Jesus accepts the invitation and goes with the Pharisee, and that's when the story gets interesting. (v37)

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.... (Luke 7:37)

Normally when we invite people over to our homes, it is by invitation only. In their culture at the time, it was a little different. Apparently when there was a meal like this, with a publicly known teacher, it was normal for it to be a *kind of* open invitation. Only the invited guests would share the meal, but others would be allowed to sit at the edges of the room, or the patio, and listen in.

That's why it wasn't unusual for the woman to come to the Pharisee's house. But what she did next, *that* was unusual. (v37)

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. (Luke 7:37-38)

The woman had come with a gift for Jesus, it seems – a jar of expensive perfume, which she would have used to anoint his head and his hands, as a way of honoring him.

But when she sees Jesus, she's overcome with emotion. She begins to cry (v38) and her tears fall all over Jesus' feet. (You might be wondering how – at dinners like those, the guests would lie on their sides, with their heads near the table and their feet behind them.)

The woman is behind Jesus and she cries so much that his feet are wet with tears. The original language uses the same word for rainshowers. She is a mess. If you know the expression ugly crying, she is ugly crying all over Jesus' feet.

I imagine every single person in the room would have noticed the scene she was causing...

It gets worse. Next she uses her hair to wipe his feet dry. Traditionally, Jewish women keep their hair covered in public – they only allow their husband to see their hair. And yet here is this woman, this sinner, letting her hair down in a room full of men, and using it like a towel to wipe Jesus' feet dry. Perhaps it says something about the kind of sin she was known for – traditionally she has been understood to be a prostitute, although Luke doesn't include that detail. Whatever her sin was, in this moment she is exposed, as it were, before Jesus. She is undignified, her face puffy with tears. She kisses Jesus' feet again and again, pouring perfume on them.

And so the question is why? Why does she have this reaction to Jesus? Is she like the Beatles fans who cried when they saw John, Paul, George and Ringo?

My mum got caught out in the 1964 Beatles tour to Australia. She is normally very straight-laced, but apparently she ditched school with friends to go and wait outside the Beatles' hotel. She and her friends ended up on the front page of the newspaper, and she caught some heat for that ;-)

Is that what the woman was doing? Was she just a groupie for Jesus?

The rest of the story tells us that her emotion came from a much deeper place. We'll get to that in a minute.

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Well the host of the party is mortified. It's not just that his party had been interrupted, it was the kind of person who caused the interruption. (v39)

³⁹When 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." (Luke 7:39)

The Pharisee is horrified. He is revulsed at the idea of this woman touching Jesus, because of her reputation as a sinner. You see, the Pharisees deliberately separated themselves from anything that might cause them to be impure. That's literally what the name Pharisee means – "one who is separated." And so he can't imagine why a religious leader would allow himself to be so close to someone known for their sin. In fact, he wonders if Jesus could really be a prophet because he doesn't seem to know what kind of a woman she is...

Jesus knows what the Pharisee is thinking. And so he tells him a parable. (v40)

⁴⁰Jesus 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?”

A denarius was the standard pay for a day’s work for a laborer or a soldier. So Jesus asks Simon to imagine this scenario where two people owe a money lender. One owes almost two years wages, the other two months wages. Neither of them are in a position to pay it off.

Back in those days, a person could be jailed until they were able to pay, or sold into slavery, or worse, they might sell their children to pay the debt. Sadly that still happens today...

Jesus wants us to imagine being on the verge of financial ruin, and then suddenly having your debt canceled. Most of us would *love* to see our debts canceled, even if we can service the debt. But imagine being on the brink of foreclosure, on the brink of losing your home, on the brink of bankruptcy, when suddenly you receive news that the full amount has been paid.

Wouldn’t that be amazing? Like a second chance when all hope was lost.

Now of course, Jesus’ parable is not really about being forgiven from financial debt. It’s an illustration about sin, and what it means to be forgiven from our debt of sin.

After all, sin is the predominant theme in our Bible passage so far:

- The woman who cried on Jesus’ feet is a renowned sinner
- Simon the Pharisee is someone who supposedly never sins
- Yet Simon is quick to judge the woman for her sin
- So we’re left wondering who is the bigger sinner...

Well, to answer that question, we need to understand what sin is. ***Sin is partly about what we do.***

Take the woman in our passage for example. She lived a lifestyle that went against the Biblical standard for morality. The Bible condemns sex outside of the context of marriage, and she was probably a prostitute, or an adulterer. Ergo – she’s a sinner. And the Bible contains lists of activities that are considered ‘sins’ if we do them.

But the heart of sin is something much deeper than just ‘doing things that God says we shouldn’t do.’

Sin is ultimately about the way we treat God.¹

And the reason is this – our world has a Creator who cares about us. Most people live lives as if this earth is all there is. And if that’s how you understand the world, then you might think of sin as just the

¹ How did Simon treat Jesus? Did not honor him...

things we do that hurt other people. But if there is a God, then we also have to think about how our actions affect our relationship with God.

If a parent says to their child, "I don't want you to do something. It's for your good," then they do it anyway, it damages the relationship between the parent and the child. When we do what God says isn't good for us, it damages our relationship with him.

The reality is that most people never listen to God in the first place. They don't want him in their life, they don't want anything to do with him. They don't try to honor God, or give him any credit for the good things in their life. They just get on with life, without God.

But God is there. And one day we'll meet him. And on that day we'll have to face up to the way that we've treated him. I'm going to say more about this in a couple of weeks. But according to Jesus' parable, it will be like facing up to a huge debt. Or being caught in adultery, like the woman. There will be a debt that we owe, and we won't be able to pay it. On that day we'll understand the enormity of our sin...

Well, Simon didn't seem to understand. He doesn't seem to understand the debt he owes to God, he doesn't understand the weight of his sin, if he recognizes it at all. I think if you asked Simon, he would say that he didn't have a sin problem at all.

Before the Apostle Paul met Jesus, he was a Pharisee, just like Simon. And in the book of Philippians, Paul lists all the reasons why *he* didn't think he had a sin problem: his heritage, the religious ceremonies he did as a child, his religious life as an adult. Paul went so far as to say that he believed he was 'faultless' when it came to 'righteousness based on the law.'

But when he came face to face with Jesus, Paul has a moment of recognition about the weight of his sin. He calls himself the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). So if the Apostle Paul, who wrote half of the New Testament, and founded most of the churches in the first 50 years of Christianity calls himself the worst of sinners, what must we be?

Jesus wants us to recognize our sin.

And then he wants us to know how good it is when our sin is forgiven.

Jesus asks Simon: "Which of [the debtors] will love him more?"

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

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When we understand our great sin, and we understand Jesus' forgiveness, then it will cause us to love Jesus more, won't it?

The sinful woman, she demonstrated her great love with the way she treated Jesus. Her emotions poured out as tears and kisses and acts of gratitude to Jesus.

But what about Simon?

⁴⁴ Then [Jesus] 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.” (Luke 7:44-47)

Simon doesn't really show any love towards Jesus. Even from a cultural point of view, Simon didn't honor Jesus in the way that a host would normally honor a guest, especially someone as distinguished as a rabbi. Normally the host would provide water and a servant to wash the feet of the guest, they would greet them with a kiss, and perhaps pour oil on their head. Simon did none of those things. He doesn't honor Jesus. He probably wanted the honor for himself, the honor of having the celebrity preacher in his home...

But the woman, she honors Jesus where Simon failed. She honors Jesus with grateful kisses and tears because she knows that she owes him everything. Her actions speak louder than words – did you notice, the woman never even speaks in this passage. But she doesn't need to. Her grateful response is clear from her actions.

And so when we think about **our** response to Jesus, the passage leaves us to consider if we are like the woman or the Pharisee? Have you understood the weight of sin, and the relief of forgiveness in a way that it brings you to tears, in a way that draws out deep emotion, in a way that makes you respond with love and gratitude to the one who purchased your forgiveness by his death on the cross?

In v47 Jesus says: *I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown.*

Our love for Jesus tells us whether we've understood the mercy of God.

If that mercy of God is something you haven't experienced yet, then you're in the right place. This is exactly the place to keep learning about God's loving mercy towards each of us, his forgiveness, and the hope we can have when we know Jesus.

I like to think that Simon went away that day challenged by what he saw. Intrigued. Rattled, perhaps, because this 'sinful' woman had experienced something that he hadn't. I suspect Simon was profoundly changed by his encounter with Jesus. What about you?

