

Sin, forgiveness, love

Luke 7:36-50

‘Your sins are forgiven...’ How do you react to that? Are you angry or offended just now? Are you feeling guilty? Are you feeling delight and freedom? What’s going on in your head and heart as you hear those words: ‘Your sins are forgiven’?

In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus has things to teach us about sin, forgiveness, and love. He shows us that these three things relate together in a way that nobody around Him is really expecting. And I’m desperately concerned we’re not expecting either, in our community or in our church.

What we’re going to find is this: *You won’t really love Jesus until you get just how sinful you really are, and just how forgiven you really are.*

In this wee passage, we read about three main characters taking centre stage - Jesus, a respectable Pharisee, and a disreputable woman. And there are people around the dinner table watching how each of these people interacts with Jesus, and He with them.

In v.36, we read about Jesus being invited in by the respectable. Are you a respectable person? The one we read about here is a Pharisee who welcomes Jesus as a guest into his home for dinner. Someone known as an upright person, a pillar of the community and someone who knows and fears God’s law. But as we go along, here’s what we find out about the respectable person...

In v.39, we find him doubting Jesus’ credentials when Jesus behaves in a way that he thinks unwise and socially unacceptable (a living example of what Jesus talked about in the passage we looked at last week). The thing that seems to trouble respectable people most seems to be socially improper or unexpected behaviour, even when it’s God they’re troubled by.

And in vv.44-46, we discover that this respectable person has really taken Jesus’ presence with him for granted. In not offering water for Jesus’ feet or a kiss on the cheek as Jesus entered; he has failed to show basic standards of hospitality for the culture, never mind lavish generosity on his honoured guest.

It would be like you ‘welcoming’ someone to your house for dinner by opening the door for them and not speaking to them at all as they came in and joined

your other guests. Which is really how a lot of respectable people do actually 'welcome' Jesus into their lives - opening the door for Him, but taking His presence there for granted without expressing any love to Him thereafter.

In contrast, in vv.37-38, we read about Jesus being sought out by the disreputable. Someone whose public reputation was for being a bad person. A sinner. Someone people wanted to avoid being around or becoming like. Is that like you? The person we read about here is a woman of ill repute - yes, she's probably a prostitute. As we go along, here's what we find out about the disreputable person...

In vv.37-38 and vv.44-46, we read about how she clings to Jesus in the most broken, humble posture - a mess of tears, feet and hair. There is no lower, more humble posture for her to take than to be weeping into the feet of the Jesus she seeks to be next to. No matter who is looking on and what they have to say.

And in those same verses, we read not only of the humility she expresses; but also of how she lavishes attention, love and costly gifts upon Jesus. In contrast to taking Jesus for granted, she is pouring out perfume on His feet that cost a year's wages.

And in v.47, Jesus describes all of this behaviour as... love. Love for Him. The respectable person with the respectable job invites Jesus in politely, shows a little interest and then takes Him for granted. And the one everyone calls a whore clings to Jesus, making a sobbing scene, and pours out her most costly possession to Him without being asked.

What leads to that difference in these people's lives? Jesus explains it in vv.40-47. He tells a story to show that sin is like a debt we owe to God. His story has three people in it - a person who owed fifty denarii (that's two months' wages), a person who owed five hundred denarii (that's over a year and a half's wages), and the creditor they owe.

What if that creditor just... cancelled both their debts in full? Jesus' question to Simon the Pharisee is, 'Now which of them will *love* him more?' And He tells Simon he's right when Simon suggests the answer, 'the one who had the bigger debt cancelled.'

As Jesus goes on to speak to Simon about sin, He invites Simon to imagine what it would be like if God just... wiped your debt clean. Well, for someone who thinks they're just a 'little sinner' like Simon, that might be quite good

news. Like someone who had a couple of years left on their mortgage to pay at a time where their income was reducing being told by the banker, 'I'll just pay that off for you.'

But for someone whom everybody knows is a 'big sinner,' (and nobody knows it more than they do themselves), it's *brilliant* news. Like someone who had fallen into mortgage arrears years ago and could never possibly see a way out of their debt, ever; being told by the banker, 'I'll just pay that off for you.'

Here's the surprising dynamic that Jesus reveals to be true. The depth of your love for Jesus depends on the depth of the sin you are aware of in your life, and the depth of the forgiveness for that which you have experienced. The more aware you are of your sinfulness, the more you know how much you have been forgiven by Jesus, and the more you will genuinely pour out your love to Him.

So if I ask you this, I hope you'll see why it matters and means something exciting and freeing and fantastic in your life:

How aware are you of your own sinfulness?

Nobody talks about sin anymore. The world doesn't. It thinks it's a bad word that makes Sunday School children grow up with guilt complexes and psychological issues. People don't want to deal with the word 'sin,' because they don't want to see it in themselves. Perhaps in other people, but not in themselves. Everyone's ignoring it, even though we all know it's there really.

Then there's the church. We don't talk about sin, either. When we talk about 'our faith in Jesus,' we talk about how He's by our side in difficult times, or He helps give us strength, or how we feel His love, or need His guidance. When do we ever talk about how we were guilty, guilty people who deserved nothing from God but death, instead of the life for which He has set us free?

As the pastor of this church family, I'm concerned that we have lost sight of our own sinfulness. Something needs to break inside us. Today. So that we get how sinful we are. So that then, we get how forgiven we are. So that then, we'll overflow with love and thanks to Jesus without even trying.

There are basically two kinds of people who haven't yet entered a life of loving Jesus in a free, complete way like the woman in our passage. There are those who say, probably quite consciously, 'I'm too sinful for God to love

me.’ And there are those who say, probably quite unconsciously, ‘I’m not sinful enough for me to love God.’

Let’s start with the latter kind. The kind like Simon the Pharisee. ‘Little sinners.’ These are people who might say, ‘I’m not perfect, of course. But who is? I’m pretty good compared with those around me. I’ve got some regrets about who I’ve been and what I’ve done, but I’m a good person.’

People who compare themselves to the world around, and find themselves doing alright. They don’t take time to compare themselves with God and His holy perfection, to find themselves totally unworthy. They get that they’ve done stuff wrong, but they think it sufficiently ‘normal’ to make excuses like these:

‘Nobody’s perfect... you do the same thing... it’s just who I am and what I’m like... God accepts us just as we are... we’re only human.’

You won’t find any ‘big sinners’ saying any of those things. People who know themselves that they are deeply sinful, broken, messed up human beings don’t say ‘oh well, we’re only human.’ They say, ‘God, have mercy on me, because I am a messed up guilty wreck.’

No, people only think and say these things when they think they’re just ‘little sinners.’ Which in turn means they don’t think they need forgiven very much. Which in turn leads to not loving Jesus in any meaningful way.

They might invite Jesus into their lives in the same way that Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus into his home. Open the door, in you come, but please just sit down over there whilst I get on with entertaining my other friends. Assuming Jesus’ presence without showing Him any gratitude, love or attention. So long as it’s all nice, and polite, and fits in with the respectable suburban life you’re trying to live out.

They’ll question Jesus when He does outrageous things and when ‘big sinners’ turn up to share their lives. They don’t really pay any attention to Jesus unless and until they’re disturbed by Him.

Do you love Jesus? *Why?* Some of you will be feeling it now - ‘no... no, I don’t really. Not with this lavish gratitude that comes so naturally to this woman.’ And you might wonder, ‘How do I love Him, then? Shall I try harder to love Him?’

No, don't do that. What a waste of time when people listen to sermons and then go home thinking, 'right, must try harder at this.' It's not going to work. You don't *try* to love Jesus. You just love Him. And if you're convicted that you don't, remember what this passage shows us: You won't really love Jesus until you get just how sinful you are, and just how forgiven you are.

For the 'little sinners,' the respectable people who think their debt to God is small, 'trying harder' is not the answer - even though that's what these people usually do. *Something needs to break in you.* And it's at stage one - realising just how sinful you really are.

You might still be sitting there, defensively holding out with the idea that 'I'm not this sinful person that the church keeps going on about.' It's not the church that said it. It's *God.* Are you going to judge *Him*?

Consider these things: What's driving you? What's the deepest desire in your heart? Do you feel any guilt around that?... Oh, do you remember that time that nobody was watching?... Well, He saw.

And what about these words - what happens in your heart when I say them? Pride. Adultery - you thought about it, didn't you? Lying - oh, all the many, many lies! Greed. Selfishness. Anger - all that anger, coming out all over the place. Walking past without doing anything. Judging them without knowing them. Still nothing you feel indebted to God about?

Take ten minutes to sit down before God one day. Sit there, in conversation with the One who sees everything about you that's hidden from everyone else, including yourself. In His presence, reflect on who you really are and what you're really like.

See if you don't come away from that with a new humility about your sinfulness. See if it doesn't also bring a strange peace; the kind that comes when you've been honest with a person about something you've needed to talk to them about.

And if you're not reading the Bible, read the Bible. Do it regularly through the week, and you will find God showing you not only His incredible love and power, but also your sinfulness. Your need for His forgiveness.

I was 13 when God showed me that I wasn't the nice goody-goody boy that I thought I was. I was 18 when God showed me that I'd forgotten how sinful I was becoming and how far from him I was wandering. I'm 33 now, and this

week I've been shown again all the things I was blind to about my vanity, insecurity, greed, impatience, selfishness and idolatry.

And at each of these times, I have praised my Saviour Jesus for how much He has forgiven me in dying for all of that. I have been set free to live and to love Him with lightness and excitement because of realising these things.

Don't try harder to love God. Instead, discover how sinful you really are. The bad news is, you're more sinful than you can possibly realise. But the good news Jesus brings is, you're more forgiven than you can possibly imagine. You need to grasp both those things to live the whole, free, full, light, and eternal life that Jesus won for you.

What has Jesus forgiven you for?

There's two stumbling blocks when people try to answer that question. One is not thinking that you particularly need forgiven, like Simon the Pharisee, which we've looked at. The other is knowing fine well just how sinful you are, but not believing that Jesus forgives you for it. The old Highland, 'I'm not good enough for God' thing.

The person who says, 'I'm too sinful for God to love me.' Why do you think that? Who told you that? God certainly didn't. The Bible doesn't say that. It says that, even though He sees every last dirty drop of sinfulness in your being, more so even than you do, God *loves* you.

He gets that you are sinful beyond you ever being able to pay that debt to Him. And now that you get it too, He wants you to know this more than anything - *you are forgiven*. Through your trust in Jesus, your debt to God is completely cancelled, just like the debtors in Jesus' little story.

God loves you, warts and all, so much that He gave His Son to die *for you*. A sacrifice for *your* sin. And if Jesus went as far as dying on a cross *for you*, how can you believe either that God doesn't love you, or that He hasn't already done *everything* necessary already for you to be completely forgiven and free? Do you think He could make it any louder and clearer?

The people who have come to church and believed in Jesus for years, but don't take communion because they think they're 'not good enough.' The people who also keep living life 'trying harder' to love God and 'be better Christians,' and find that it isn't working, and they just keep feeling guiltier and

guiltier. Do *you* love Jesus? The thing is, you're *trying*. Oh, how you're trying. *Stop trying harder! Something needs to break in you, too.*

It's not getting how sinful you really are. You already get that. *But it's getting how forgiven you really are.* You haven't got to try harder. You've got to look at the cross, and accept something. Accept just how completely free, forgiven and loved you are. Once you do, you'll stop carrying that crippling guilt and anxiety about your sinfulness, and start expressing a lavish, free and delighted love for Jesus.

'Do you see this woman?' Jesus asks in v.44. Do *you* see this woman? Do you see her holding back from approaching Jesus because she's 'not good enough'? No, you see her falling at His feet, pouring out her tears on them and wiping them with her unkempt hair because she knows how much she has been forgiven, and how much He has loved her.

Let your pent up, buttoned up, polite deference and self-loathing burst open. Spill it out to Jesus, tell Him the sin that you know is yours and that you're carrying around like a bag you can't let go of, and let Him tell you - 'I've taken it. You are free.'

Let the words of Jesus to the woman in vv.48-50 be His words to you, too: 'Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' This is what He wants you to know. What He wants you to celebrate.

Once you've accepted just how sinful you really are, *and* just how forgiven you really are - *that's* when you start loving Jesus. When you start clinging to Him in a never-want-to-let-go-and-I-don't-care-who's-watching kind of way. When you pour out your gifts of attention, love, money, worship, time and prayer without *trying* to do it, but because you *delight* to do it.

'Your sins are forgiven.' If you're offended by that, you need something to break in you at the first step - realising just how sinful you are. If you're vexed and feeling guilty about that, you need something to break in you at the next step - realising just how forgiven you are. And if you're delighted by that, you'll already be living the way this forgiven woman did - with a humble, free, lavishly expressed love for Jesus.

She's pouring herself out at Jesus' feet because she loves Him so much. And that's because He first loved her even more. She poured herself out for Him in tears and costly perfume with a village watching her humiliating

posture. He poured Himself out for her in blood and sacrifice on a cross with the whole world watching His humiliating, stripped naked death.

However much we lavish our love upon Jesus, He always lavishes more on us. Isn't that great? To know that love, and to be saved by it, means knowing what this woman knew, and Simon the Pharisee didn't. I'm a great big sinner. But Jesus is a greater, bigger, forgiving God. And I love Him so much for it.