

7.45am & 9.30am

‘Luke - The Doctor Is In’

8 January 2017

The Hopeless and The Helpless

Luke 7:36-50

Recap:

We’re back in Luke’s gospel today, to fill in a gap we left late last year in our series on Luke. Remember, we’re following Jesus’ in his ministry in the first half of Luke’s gospel. And what we’re noticing particularly is his concern for and compassion on the vulnerable, the suffering and the outcast.

And we read that this was motivated by the statements that he made about his mission, drawn from the Old Testament, such as Isaiah 61, which he proclaimed to have been fulfilled as he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth:

““The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

(Luke 4:18–19 ESV)

The point is that God is not building for himself a kingdom of winners, of high-achievers, of A-grade personalities, of those who have. He’s building a kingdom of losers, of sinners, of those who have nothing.

He’s kind to the unworthy, he loves the unlovely, he is generous to those who can offer nothing in return; and in this way he demonstrates **grace** - undeserved favour;

through Jesus himself, to forgive sins, and to save those who were frankly not worth saving.

Today's text records a very poignant encounter between Jesus and a prostitute, and illustrates this grace in a very profound way.

1. Cast of Three:

Our reading for today records the interplay between three different characters: a Pharisee, named Simon, Jesus, and an unnamed "woman of the city, who was a sinner".

1. Pharisee

Let's start with the Pharisee.

Pharisees were Jews, but they had particular distinctives about the way they observed their faith. There were a few different groups like this in Jesus' time. In the Bible, we also meet another group called the Sadducees.

It's a bit like different church denominations today. We may all be Christians, but some would identify strongly as baptists, others as presbyterian, others as pentecostal or anglican.

What made Pharisees different was the way they took the Old Testament Law very seriously. One Bible dictionary says that they were experts in the Law, and that:

"...they promoted a special living tradition in addition to the laws; they were very interested in issues of ritual purity and tithing; and they believed in afterlife, judgment, and a densely populated, organised spirit world."¹

¹ "PHARISEES," Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, 1043.

A Jewish historian of the first century says that they were,

“...a certain sect of Jews that appear more religious than others, and seem to interpret the laws more accurately.”²

What’s more, they occupied an exalted place in society, and were sort of like ‘power-brokers’ between the noble classes and the common people.

This gives us a small picture of the kind of person Simon may have been.

All through the gospels, Jesus’ teaching about a return to God’s righteous standards and the coming of the Kingdom tends to resonate in a particular way with the Pharisees. For this reason they become very interested in what Jesus has to say, the their paths often cross.

So, we’re not to assume that Simon was a friend or supporter of Jesus, or even a critic or an antagonist, trying to make a fool of Jesus in front of his friends by inviting him to dinner. Simon may simply have been curious, and wanted to see this Jesus for himself, and see what all the fuss was about.

2. Teacher

Second, we have Jesus himself, the teacher. This was how Jesus was thought of among the Pharisees and many of the common people. He would open and explain God’s Word.

This is probably the context in which Jesus is invited to be Simon’s dinner guest.

It’s interesting to note what Simon actually calls Jesus in v39. He says, “*If this man were a prophet*” (Luke 7:39 ESV).

² “PHARISEES,” The New International Dictionary of the Bible, n.p.

We're familiar with prophets from the Old Testament, like Isaiah and Jeremiah.. They were the ones God used to take his message to his people, a message of turning back to him.

Perhaps Simon thought Jesus was more than a teacher, but certainly not the promised Old Testament Messiah. Prophet seemed a good middle-ground.

3. Sinner

Finally, we have the "*woman of the city, who was a sinner*" (v37).

This is a cryptic description. Some other translations say, "A woman in that town who lived a sinful life" (NIV), or "a certain immoral woman from that city" (NLT).

It probably meant that she was a prostitute, and also that everyone knew it. In Bible times, it seems that the local community knew where the prostitute's house was, like Rahab in the city of Jericho when the spies visited in Joshua 1.

There is also very little, if any, dignity in the way she conducts herself here. Maybe this tells us that she was used to shame and humiliation.

In the Old Testament Law, with which Simon would have been very familiar, one of the easiest ways to invite spiritual uncleanness, and distance yourself from God and his people, was by having sex with someone you weren't married to. You can just imagine the reputation, especially among pious people, of someone who did that for a living.

This 'sinner' emerges from the shadows, making her entrance quietly in the background of this scene. The text says she had heard where Jesus was, and wanted to see him.

But there was something conspicuous about her (aside from her reputation), and that was the small perfume flask she was carrying. These weren't unusual in Jesus' day, and many women would carry them on a cord around their neck. They were also reasonably expensive: in a similar story in John 12, Jesus is anointed with perfume which would have had a street-value of a year's wages for an average labourer - according to none other than Judas Iscariot! The perfume flask was small and round, with a long neck which was broken when the perfume or ointment was required.

2. Disgrace

I guess the most striking thing about this whole event is how, in the middle of a respectable dinner party among respectable people, the party crashed by this woman who is reduced to scavenging on the animal lusts of society.

She was a disgrace. She absolutely did not belong there, and yet there she was. Like if you'd served bacon at a Bar Mitzvah.

Just to clear something up, if any of us were throwing a dinner party at our own house, and suddenly a stranger skulked into the dining room and one of our guests, our first thought would probably to go for the shot gun, or dial 000.

In Jesus' time, life was far more public and community-oriented than it is today. At a gathering of respected teachers like this, people may even have come to watch and listen to the conversation around the table, like spectators. The meal may have taken place in the courtyard of a large home, a fairly public setting.

So to have people wandering in and out of this event might seem really weird to us, but it was normal to Simon and his guests.

But the woman didn't stop at being a spectator. Luke paints us a picture of a person who's heart has been deeply affected, perhaps someone who is truly feeling real

feelings for the first time in years. Because people usually ate lying on their side, heads towards the table, and feet behind, away from the table, Luke says (v38) that as she was...

“...standing behind him at his feet, **weeping**, she began to **wet his feet with her tears** and **wiped them with the hair of her head** and **kissed his feet** and **anointed** them with the ointment.”

- (Luke 7:38 ESV)

We see here a person who is absolutely overcome with emotion, so much so that it causes her to act quite impulsively and to forget social protocols.

It appears that her plan was simply to pour the ointment over Jesus' feet, an act which in itself would have carried great significance.

Anointing with oil or perfume was a mark of great honour. However, it was usually done on the head, but that would have been going a little too far. Instead, the woman plans to anoint Jesus' feet, being more easily accessible. Tending to the feet was also traditionally the job of the slaves, so would have been an expression of humility.

We'll see some of the woman's motives for this later.

Before she can get there, though, she bursts into tears. Quietly crying her eyes out, trying desperately not to draw any more attention to herself, she soaks Jesus' feet in her tears. When she regains some composure, she realises what she has done, and is deeply embarrassed.

She has nothing to dry Jesus' feet. Instead, she improvises, and uses her own hair. A woman's hair was actually a very intimate part of her body in Jesus' time. For a Jewish woman to tie her hair in public was a divorceable offence - it just wasn't done. For a very simple reason: it made you look like a prostitute.

It was vulgar for this woman to be touching Jesus' with her hair, but she didn't care (and evidently, neither did Jesus). Nothing mattered to her at all anymore, except Jesus. She no longer cared what others thought - a love for Jesus had so overwhelmed her heart that it had pushed out all concern for self. She was a disgrace in the eyes of the world, but she no longer cared what they thought - only what her Lord thought.

And then she kissed his feet. Kissing the feet was an act of humble worship, of love, of adoration. The tense in the original Greek wording here is what's called a 'present continuous'. It means she just keeps on kissing his feet. It's almost as if she's so moved by her love for Jesus that she can't stop, because no amount of kisses would ever be enough to express her love for him, nor his worthiness of such worship.

Finally, she does what she came to do, and anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume.

Bible teacher Kent Hughes writes:

"The woman was a self-forgetful mess — crying unashamedly, her nose runny with weeping, her hair stringy with the muddy mixture of dirt and tears.

I would be embarrassed if I saw such a display. Yet, though it was clearly passionate, it was not erotic. It was a beautiful and fully proper outpouring of love by a redeemed soul. Slaves were assigned to attend the feet of others, but she washed his feet at her own command. It was an act of desperately joyous humility.

This dear woman loved Jesus! And she was in the spring of spiritual health. [...] Despite her sad past, she was brimming with spiritual life!³

³ R. Kent Hughes, Luke Volume 1: That You May Know the Truth (Preaching the Word; Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 277.

3. Condescension

Realise that up to this point, no-one has actually said anything. This has all taken place in silence, or with the murmur of many indistinct conversations around the table.

Simon's watching this incident with Jesus and the woman, and he thinks to himself:

““If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.””

- (Luke 7:39 ESV)

Doubts about Jesus are setting in. In fact, he may even be having a laugh at Jesus' expense. “Just wait till he realises who's touching him - this teacher is going to get nasty shock when he realises he's been defiled by this woman! What a fool, not even realising who she is.”

Even the word he uses for 'touching' has crude overtones. We might have used a word like 'fondling' or 'groping'

What would Simon have done had he been in Jesus' sandals? Pushed her away? Thrown her out in the street? Shamed her in front of everyone? Reminded her what a wicked and worthless sinner she was, and that she only had Hell to look forward to? Told her that God couldn't possibly love someone like her?

Simon had missed what had just happened around his own dinner table. Or at least, he had missed its seriousness.

To Simon, all he can see is a notorious prostitute.

“She came to honour Jesus.”

“Yes, but she’s a *prostitute*.”

“She has clearly been deeply affected by Jesus.”

“Yes, but she’s a *prostitute*.”

Simon’s problem was that he had a faulty scale for measuring righteousness and sin. He measured by purely outward standards, completely ignoring the state of the heart - something Jesus, being God, specialises in. It was unthinkable to Simon, but he and the woman were far more alike than he was willing to admit.

Author Preston Sprinkle tells the story of Carol, an ex-prostitute he met who had turned to Jesus.

“I didn’t wake up one day and decide to be a prostitute,” she told me. “I had a job, a family. *I was living the same life you are.*” But after Carol’s husband left her, she lost her house, her family, her job, and she ended up coddling a bottle of whiskey — the only hope she had left. But drinking led to drugs, and drugs led to more drugs. Before she knew it, Carol was on the streets, scrambling to support her habit. And the streets are a frightening place when you’re a woman in need of food, shelter and rivers of heroin.

“Work for me and I’ll protect you, provide for you, and keep a steady flow of heroine pumping through your veins,” promised a pimp. And the rest is history. Carol was a sinner engaged in sinful activity — aren’t we all? — but a complex web of personal sin and societal evil nurtured her downward spiral into prostitution.”⁴

Sprinkle goes on,

“One thing Carol told me still haunts me to this day and forces me on my knees, begging for more grace. She said, “We are all one bad decision away from being on the streets.”⁵

⁴ *Charis: God’s Scandalous Grace For Us*, by Preston Sprinkle, © 2014, David C. Cook (iBooks, n.p.)

⁵ *Ibid.*

We don't know the whole story of this woman who turned up at Simon's house to see Jesus. But we do know that as little as one bad decision separated the religious leader and the prostitute. Hey, as little as one bad decision separates you and I from this "*woman of the city, who was a sinner,*" (Luke 7:37 ESV). One bad decision held back by a fine scarlet thread of God's grace.

4. Grace

Despite no words being said, Jesus in his divine knowledge knows the condescending and self-righteous thoughts moving through Simon's mind like a poisonous gas. Let's pick it up in v40:

"And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

- (Luke 7:40–42 ESV)

A denarius was the average day's wage for a labourer. That gives you some idea of the kind of figures Jesus is talking about. One man owes his entire daily wage for one-and-a-half years, another his entire daily wage for one-and-a-half months.

Both are unable to pay.

But the loan shark takes a pen, and draws a line through both their debts. And next to each name he writes, "Paid in full."

Jesus's question is, "Which man would be more grateful, or love him more: the one who owed 500 or the one who owed 50?"

It almost seems a silly question. Of course the one who has been forgiven the greater debt! If you'd been let off a small debt, you'd be grateful; if you'd been let off a large debt, you'd be brimming over with admiration for the one who cancelled the debt.

Simon probably realises that Jesus is referring obliquely to the woman. We've seen his condescension towards the woman, but his growing condescension to this so-called 'prophet' and 'teacher' isn't hard to miss in his reply:

“Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.””

- (Luke 7:43 ESV)

I'd like to show you something in the previous chapter that might give us some insight into the state of Simon and this woman's hearts.

Earlier in Luke 7, Jesus receives some of John the Baptist's disciples who have some questions about Jesus' ministry. After he has sent them on their way, he tells the gathered crowds about the importance of John's ministry.

Luke has already told us in ch3 that John's ministry consisted of “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Luke 3:3 ESV)

But in 7:29, Luke makes an interesting editorial comment:

“(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptised with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptised by him.)”

- (Luke 7:29–30 ESV)

Is Luke telling us that this woman and the Pharisee are on opposite sides of the gospel John proclaimed? Is this woman coming to Jesus because she has responded to John's call to repent and be baptised, bearing fruit in keeping with repentance, and now has found the Lamb of God, who has taken away her sins? Is this why the woman has sought out Jesus, to thank and adore him for what he has done for her? It seems very likely.

Jesus continues to teach Simon:

“Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?”

Interesting question! All Simon sees is a prostitute, a sinner. He is blind to seeing her as a woman, someone's daughter, and with the dignity of being created in the image of God. Jesus goes on:

“I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven — for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.””

- (Luke 7:44–47 ESV)

While they may have been customary, none of the things Jesus mentions is specifically required in Jewish Law. If they had been, you can be sure Simon the Pharisee would not have neglected them! He was a man of religious duty.

But this is what makes the woman's actions all the more remarkable. Jesus says that in every instance, she has gone above and beyond custom. Why?

She loves much, because much was forgiven.

And there is yet more grace:

“And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.””

- (Luke 7:48–50 ESV)

She had been forgiven before her outpouring of love towards Jesus here. And yet, Jesus assures her again she has been forgiven.

He becomes like a loving and gentle father, reminding a distressed child that they are still loved. “It’s ok, my dear, you are forgiven. The work is done.”

He says it yet again at the end, “Your faith has saved you (note: *not* your actions), go in peace. There is nothing left to do. Go and enjoy your new life in me.”

Have you ever found yourself doubting your forgiveness? Doubting whether Jesus has actually forgiven that thing you did? This should tell us that Jesus is willing to remind us of and assure us of our forgiveness in him as often as it takes for us to believe it. He really is that patient and that compassionate.

Conclusions

There are a few things to reflect on as we draw this together.

1. Grace

Firstly, as much as grace to forgive sin was available to this “sinner of sinners”, God’s grace through Jesus Christ is available for you, whoever you are, and whatever you’ve done.

Every single one of us, regardless of the exact nature of our sins, is 'insolvent' before God, and he has called in our debts.. And yet God offers forgiveness, cancelling of our debt, through Jesus, equally to all.

If you have not been forgiven of your debt, come to Jesus today and be forgiven.

Come to the cross, and see your sin laid on him and paid for. Come to the empty tomb, and see your own life resurrected in Jesus. See him ascend to heaven in the hope that he will certainly return for you. If you want help with that, please see me or Hillary after the service, or get in touch during the week.

2. Compassion

Secondly, note the difference in the way Simon and Jesus reacted to the woman. Simon was contemptuous. Jesus was compassionate.

Simon followed the approach of conventional moralism, which judges based on what it sees. Conventional moralism condemns outwards sins, and ignores inward sins.

All he could see was a woman who had sold herself to sin, who was unclean, and beneath him. Her sin (which had been forgiven!) moves him to personal pride and self-righteousness - what a wicked combination in the face of another's destruction.

Jesus, on the other hand sees her sin, and far more than Simon ever could. Jesus says, quite clearly that her sins are many (v47). He doesn't ignore her sins. But he declares that they are forgiven.

How often do we condemn those around us based on the sins we perceive, of which we must admit, we have very limited and flawed knowledge? How often do we make our standards functionally higher than the Eternal Judge, judging people for the few sins we see, when he is willing, through Jesus to forgive the many sins he sees clearly?

How often do we forget that just fine scarlet thread of God's grace is all that keeps us from doing the most wicked and hideous things ourselves?

Let's pray for the grace to imitate Jesus here, and learn to love those around us like God does. No-one, no matter how countless their sins, is beyond the reach of God's love, pity and compassion. And neither should they be from ours.

3. Passion

Thirdly, I think there's a lesson to learn that a **passionate and emotive response to Jesus is never something to be ashamed of.**

If we are capable of love, passion, joy, gratitude; even shame and embarrassment as normal human beings and about earthly things, why should those things not be stirred even more when our Creator acts to show us supreme love and grace through Jesus, which we can never repay?

In fact, to never be deeply moved by who Jesus is and what he has done for you might be a symptom of a deeper issue: that what you know in your head about Jesus has never penetrated your heart.

Jesus said quite clearly, quoting the Old Testament:

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

- (Mark 12:30 ESV)

The heart is an important part of the whole person that God redeems through Jesus.

Of course, God has made some people more expressive, and others more reserved. That's ok.

But however he has made you, be very careful of building such a wall around your heart that makes Jesus unwelcome there.

J.C. Ryle, the English church leader, once said:

“Of all the things that will surprise us in the resurrection morning, this, I believe, will surprise us most: that we did not love Christ more before we died.”⁶

Let yourself be moved, in whatever way is authentic for you, by what he has done for you - like the woman at this dinner party.

How about we pray?

⁶ John Blanchard, ed., *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Accordance electronic ed. New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.