

Outcasts: Great Debt to Great Love
Sermon 7-23-17
Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Luke 7:36-50

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." ⁴¹"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." ⁴⁸Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Message:

(Play video at <https://youtu.be/SINGJ1Sr9bM>) When you take someone's behavior out of context it can seem strange. What if you only saw this video from twenty-three seconds on? You'd probably think she's crazy! It's not until you know WHY she's acting that way that it all makes sense and warms your heart. Similarly, when this woman bathes Jesus with her tears it comes as a surprise and out of context. Why is this woman doing this? As Simon, the Pharisee, said, "Does he not know that this woman is a sinner?" In other words, this woman

should not be here. And this woman doesn't deserve to be in the Rabbi's presence, Jesus.

This story sets us up to be critical of Simon, the Pharisee. But I want to invite you into looking at each of the characters perspectives today. As I outline each of their perspectives and understanding of the scenario, I want you to find the one you identify with most. The woman, Jesus or the Pharisee. We typically think of Pharisees as ones who have ill-intent. Who follow the rules to a fault. And who are being mischievous in their attempts to deceive and trip-up Jesus. But what if in this scenario Simon had no ill-intent. He saw the holy Rabbi, Jesus, and simply wanted to invite him in for a meal to honor him. All of his intentions are good. But then this woman comes-in and steals his thunder. Simon was offering an honorary gesture and this woman comes in and washes his feet with her tears. I can imagine that Simon feels slighted and undermined. "What in the world is this crazy lady doing? Here, I went out of my way in an act of good will to invite this radical Rabbi into my home and this sinner is embarrassing me by washing his feet." Simon is not only embarrassed, but afraid that Jesus will be offended. Because if you remember from the rituals and practices of the Old Testament, a sinner was deemed ceremonially unclean. So let's say Simon and Jesus are deemed clean. This unclean, sinning woman is coming in contact with the clean. Therefore, making them unclean. That's why the text says in verse 39, "³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.'" Simon is not only embarrassed by this woman, but is also questioning Jesus' authority. "If this man were a prophet..." If Jesus could see like prophets, he would not allow such a woman to wash his feet. You also have to understand, culturally speaking, that according to biblical scholar Alan Culpepper, "Touching or caressing a man's feet could have sexual overtones, as did letting down her hair, so a woman never let down her hair in public." So this woman embarrasses and undermines Simon's goodwill gesture to Jesus, she is unclean because she is a sinner and she violates social conventions with her gesture that, culturally speaking, would indicate she has sexual interest in Jesus. In Simon's defense, he believes he is being faithful to God by staying away from unclean things. This is what was outlined in the Old Testament. So I believe Simon's heart is to be faithful, but his understanding of what it is to be faithful might be off from the message Jesus brings. Also in Simon's defense, Jesus gives him a pretty hard time. Starting in verse 44, "'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.'" The gestures of this woman are

not social expectations of a host honoring their guest. You might say, Jesus was unfair in his judgment of Simon because he didn't know these were the social rules they were playing by. If he knew those were the social rules, he would have abided by those rules and honored Jesus in that way. Jesus then claims that he forgives this woman's sins. According to Old Testament theology, only God is the forgiver of sins through the sacrificial system. And here Jesus is claiming that he can forgive sins. For Simon, the things Jesus is claiming and doing are so foreign to his understanding of God, that Simon is just short of saying and proclaiming "Heretic!!" Or maybe even calling Jesus a "False Prophet." Verse 49, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

Who among us is like Simon? We do our very best to be faithful to God. We take great pride in structure and rules. That to follow the rules. To gain more knowledge of those rules. To operate within the laws and rules faithfully is being faithful to God. In one sense, there is nothing wrong with this. We all must follow the rules to live in harmony with one another and with God. If we did not have agreed upon rules to abide by, we may have the opposite extreme, chaos. Or maybe your someone who has a limited encounter with God. You only know God through Sunday morning worship and reading your Bible. But what about knowing God through experiencing his creation? Through prayer? Through friendship, relationship and community? One of the many points that Jesus is trying to make with Simon is not that he has been unfaithful. But that Simon may have a wrong understanding of what it means to be faithful to God. That God doesn't want just obedience to a wrathful/vengeful being. That God desires Simon's heart. His love. Because He first loved us.

Let's shift our perspective to Jesus. From Jesus' point of view, he's not trying to embarrass Simon. He knows that Simon's intentions were good and right. He was playing by the rules that he understood. He also knows that although this woman is a sinner and is violating social rules, that her heart is also in the right place. She is washing his feet with her tears for two reasons. She loves Jesus and she has experienced the power of forgiveness in her life. With Simon's comment, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus may be offended by the insult. But more than trying to prove that He is indeed a prophet and so much more, Jesus sees a teaching opportunity for Simon. And since Simon plays by social conventions or rules, unlike the woman, Jesus poses a riddle. It was common for a host or guest to compete in a game of wit and wisdom when inside the home. So Jesus poses this riddle starting in verse 40, "⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'Speak.' ⁴¹'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them.

Now which of them will love him more?’⁴³ Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’” While Simon needed forgiveness too and Simon may go regularly to the temple to be forgiven, he may not understand the depth and meaning of forgiveness. To Jesus’ point, I wonder sometimes how much I understand the depth and meaning of forgiveness. I’ve been in the church all my life and I’ve experienced forgiveness. I can’t name many instances where I felt like my debt or my sin was unforgiveable. There were certainly times where I experienced great forgiveness. I think, by comparison, of someone who has made many bad mistakes in their life and maybe by mid-life experiences a forgiveness that they can never repay to Jesus. I would think they would understand forgiveness much greater than myself. Now, that doesn’t make me a better or worse Christian. Jesus just seems to see that it is far greater to show mercy and grace to the one who is in greater debt and needs greater forgiveness. For the impact will be that much greater. Starting in verse 47, “...⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” For Jesus, he has great compassion on the one who is willing to risk much. This woman risked being mocked and ridiculed to both offer love and ask for forgiveness. So she understands the gracious and loving relationship with God better than anyone who goes to the temple regularly and sacrifices. Furthermore, there may be more sin in Simon’s life than he is admitting to. So because he asks for little forgiveness, he also doesn’t understand the depth of God’s love.

How many of you identify with Jesus? You are in a scenario where conventional social rules are being violated, but you recognize the heart of another. While the other might be weird and awkward, you know that their heart is to love and to receive the grace of God. You also may have had a teaching opportunity. You don’t want to come off as too harsh as to devastate the rule follower, but you want to help them to see that following the rules sometimes isn’t the best way to do ministry. In fact, to see someone’s heart and have compassion upon them is a far greater act than abiding by societal rules. Have you ever had a time where you had compassion upon someone in an inconvenient moment? Or in a weird setting? Maybe it was that person who broke-down crying in the grocery store. Or maybe it was that person who was throwing a tantrum with the cashier. Maybe it was that homeless person on the street. Were you able to have grace and compassion upon them?

Last perspective comes from the woman. There is no backstory for this woman in this scene. All we know is that Simon proclaims her as a sinner. So imagine with me for a second what her background might be. Imagine with me that as a teenager she fell in love with the wrong man. And she got pregnant.

When her father found out, he kicked her out of the home. Because she was kicked out of her home, she went to the man she fell in love with. But upon finding out she was pregnant, he didn't want anything to do with her because it would hurt his chances of getting in a good arranged marriage. So she was alone and did not get the care she needed. She became a pregnant beggar on the street. Because of malnutrition, she lost her baby. She had no baby, no money, no food and no home. So to make her way in this world she sold her herself in prostitution. Upon hearing and seeing Jesus, she was reminded of her former life. She felt the emptiness of the prostituted life. She felt convicted of the decisions she made. And she can see how one sin just built upon the next sin. She wants something better. Something more. Jesus seems to be the answer. She had very little. Words couldn't express her anguish. When she would rehearse her confession she could hardly say it all because she was overcome with tears. But she was determined to seek God's forgiveness in Jesus. She heard the words of Jesus before, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." So she followed Jesus to this home and stumbled to the floor with the jar of ointment. She didn't know this home and she didn't care who's home it was. All she knew is that she loved Jesus and came to lay her burdens. Her sins. At his feet. She wanted to express her confession in words, but the tears were already flowing uncontrollably. She realized that her tears were soaking his dirty feet and making mud. But she didn't have anything to wipe his feet. The best thing she had was her hair. She knew that she shouldn't untie her hair for it meant she was sexually interested. But that's all she had. So she untied her hair and continued to wipe and clean his feet. Crying, kissing and anointing. It was a mess. But she knew that Jesus understood her actions when he told the riddle and his final words to her were, "Your sins are forgiven." She felt this deep wave come over her and this incredible weight of sin washed away. She went and sinned no more.

How many of you identify with the woman? You may have made many mistakes in your life, but have also experienced the depth of forgiveness. I imagine that for most of us in this room, we have experienced debt in our lives. I'm thinking primarily of financial debt. And for those of you who were able to get out of that debt, how did it feel? As Christine and I continue to make our climb out of financial debt, we feel this great sense of freedom and empowerment. We can do this! But we also know that the only reason we can do this is by the grace and mercy of God. Like I stated earlier, how many of us have risked laying all of our sins at the feet of Jesus? How many of us are willing to be that vulnerable to lay naked before Jesus and say "This is all I've done. Forgive me." And not just

when you first receive Christ as your savior. But being willing to again and again come back to the well of God's grace to experience greatness of His love and mercy.

When we think about outcasts, they always have a story. A story that I'm sure is full of mistakes and wrong doing. But again, can we see as Jesus saw? That these people who may be weird and who may violate certain social conventions and rules, can we see that they need compassion? That they need us to see through their protective exteriors to the depths of their heart. I believe we live in a world where many of us want to live and think like Simon. We want things to be simple and structured. But we need to think and see more like Jesus. Embracing the messiness of grace, love and forgiveness. And maybe on the other side of this, some of us are the weeping woman at Jesus' feet. We need to be willing to risk it all to experience salvation in Jesus Christ. To lay all that we are at Jesus' feet. To allow him to restore each and every one of us unto him. If you are the outcast, the weeping woman, I invite you today to receive Christ's forgiveness and His salvation. He will give you freedom like you've never imagined. If you have been much like Simon, I invite you to shift your perspective to see like Jesus. To see the compassion and love that many people need in this world. They need the touch of Jesus. Many of us have experienced this great debt and this great love. Because of our gratitude for this great love and forgiveness that we have in Christ, let us spread that same great love and forgiveness to those around us. Amen.