

“The One With the Prostitute, the Pharisee, and Jesus” // Luke 7:36–50 // *In Step #4*

Do what you do well, for the glory of God. And do it somewhere strategic, for the mission of God. When we talk about generosity we're not just talking about finances. The question we've been asking for two years is what it would look like to put Jesus first in your time and talents, in addition to your treasure. Praise God for a couple who is responding to the extravagant generosity of God by putting their 'yes' on the table and allowing God to put it on the map.

Joby Martin, whom you may know as one of our favorite guest preachers here, tells a story about his early days of ministry. Joby was a youth pastor in North Myrtle Beach, but because the church couldn't pay him a full-time salary he took a second job working at a gym on the strip there. He said that the gym owner was a pretty smart guy so he walked right across the street to the Crazy Horse Gentlemen's Club and offered all the ladies that worked there free memberships to his gym. And all of a sudden, Joby says, a lot of the men in the North Myrtle beach started coming to his gym to workout.

Joby said that when business was slow, he would do some of my sermon prep in the smoothie-making-area, and there he got to know some of these women. I learned that they had names, he said. Their real names were not Bambie and Cinnamon, but names like Carla and Sharon. And I learned that they all had a few things in common--at least the majority of them:

- None of them wanted to have the job that they currently had
- Most had taken the job thinking they'd do it only for a short time to get out of some financial crisis issue and then leave
- For most of them, those financial issues had to do with being abandoned by some man
- Most had kids and they didn't want their kids to know how mommy made money
- And all of them, he said, had to drink or take some substance before they "performed"

Joby said he invited one of these ladies to come to church with him. He said it was pretty obvious, just by how she was dressed, who she was or what kind of work she was in. He said that when she came in with him and sat down a lot of people in this small little Baptist church he was youth pastor at were whispering and pointing. At the end of the service, a deacon asked to speak to him in the pastor's office, where they were joined by the pastor and 2 other deacons. The deacon explained that the purpose of the church was to protect its members and especially their children from "women like that."

Joby said when he walked back to the car, she was sitting inside crying. He said, "I tried to lie and say that the discussion wasn't about her but she wasn't stupid. She knew what the meeting was about."

He said: **How is it not heartbreaking that a woman like that feels the most degraded when she walks into a church;** that she feels more love and acceptance dancing in front of drunken men on vacation than she does in a place that bears Jesus' name?

(And by the way, if that's you today, let me briefly pause to say two things: First, I'm deeply sorry you've been treated that way by people in the church. That's wrong; and Jesus is quite the opposite. And second, I hope today to demonstrate to you that we don't feel that way about you, either.)

Years ago **Phillip Yancey wrote a book called *What's So Amazing About Grace*** in which he explains what a lot of us know all too well: a lot of our churches have been poor stewards of grace. I read this book right after college. I had graduated from a Christian school where everything was about dressing right and talking right and listening to the right style music--where the length of your hair and the translation of the Bible were more important than what was going on in your heart; and where people were often defined by their mistakes and reduced to labels--divorced; drunk; pregnant-before-marriage. It created a community that looked great on the outside that was filled with a lot of brokenness where people hid. And so Yancey's book really resonated with me, and my guess is that message probably resonates with a lot of you as well.

Many Christians seem totally devoid of the one thing that is supposed to characterize our experience with God: grace. What saves the Christian is *grace*. What sustains us is *grace*. What fuels and motivates us is *grace*. What secures our future is *grace*. *For it is by grace we have been saved through faith... It is by faith we now have access into this grace in which we stand.* From start to finish, our walk with God is grace, grace; grace that is greater than all our sin!

- C.S. Lewis once **walked into a room** at Cambridge where a group of his fellow professors were discussing world religions. They had written down on a chalkboard all these things world religions had in common. They knew he was a Christian and asked him, "So what do you think makes Christianity different from all other religions?" Lewis looked "Oh, that's simple...grace!"
- **In every other world religion**, acceptance is given because you keep the rules well enough. In Christianity, acceptance is given as a gift and you keep the rules in a response of gratefulness and worship.

Grace--a real experience with grace--is the most transforming power on the planet. Some of you feel like something is missing in your spiritual life--you lack passion or you feel spiritually dry. I want to show you that losing touch with grace is at the root of that.

Luke 7 if you have your Bibles. As you are turning there Many of us think that grace showed up in our Bibles with the coming of Jesus. The **OT God was cranky and vengeful**--kind of like God-in-his-middle-school years--and when Jesus showed up it was like God had a change of heart and ready to try a new tact of kindness and gentleness. But that's not true. In the Hebrew Scriptures, what we now call the OT, the Hebrew word for grace, ***hesed***, is used nearly **250x**, compared only **140x** in the NT. Grace has always been a defining characteristic of God.

That said, when Jesus appeared, he lived out the fullest expression of it. The Apostle John called Jesus "**full of grace and truth**," and in just about every interaction Jesus has with people, we see grace at work in real time. Nowhere is this more true than in our text today.

Luke 7: This such is a beautiful passage. **Charles Spurgeon** loved this passage so much he preached five different sermons on this text. I've only got one. Vs. **36 Then one of the Pharisees invited him to eat with him.**

He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. Can I just say real quick--Jesus had this thing about eating with losers. All throughout Luke you'll find him in the homes of unpleasant people: tax collectors; self-righteous religious hypocrites; people with problems. I point this out because some Christians seem only to want to hang out with people who have it together. Jesus wasn't like that. He did life with broken and messed up people and you could always find him with them.

37 And a woman in the town who was a sinner (BTW, "woman who was a sinner" is Bible-speak for 'prostitute') found out that Jesus was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house. She brought an alabaster jar of perfume 38 and stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to wash his feet with her tears. She wiped his feet with her hair, kissing them and anointing them with the perfume. *Kissing and anointing his feet*--aside from just being kinda gross, was also deeply suggestive. In those days, taking off your veil and letting down your hair was considered highly suggestive and inappropriate--something you only did in your home, around your husband. Clearly this woman had not gotten the memo on how to act when the preacher came over.

Everybody felt awkward and embarrassed, but Jesus doesn't seem embarrassed at all. Quite the opposite. He seems pleased. And 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "(Well,) This man, if he (actually) were a prophet, would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—she's a sinner!" 40 Jesus replied to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." There's a little prophetic irony at work here. Simon has just thought to himself, "If Jesus were *actually* a prophet he would know what kind of woman this was and send her away." Jesus reads Simon's mind and diagnosing his thoughts and heart, which would be another way of showing he was a prophet!

(Simon) said, "Say it, teacher." 41 "A creditor had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Since they could not pay it back, he graciously forgave them both. So, which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one he forgave more." (Kind of says it begrudging, doesn't he?)

"You have judged correctly," he told him. 44 Turning to 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, with her tears, has washed my feet and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. 46 You didn't anoint my head with olive oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. 47 Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that's why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little."

48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

49 Those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" (BTW: It's a good question. If Jesus is not God, how is he forgiving sins? Sins are committed against God, which means only God can forgive them. If I'm standing next to you and someone walks up and smacks you in the face, and I look over at them and say, "I forgive you!" You are going to object. You're going to say, "Uh, that was my face that got smacked, it's mine to forgive." And you'd be right. So see this for what it is: *In forgiving sins, Jesus is identifying himself as God.* And everybody knew it.)

50 And (then) he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

The scandal of grace. Grace confuses and offends religious people because people who've worked hard and kept the rules don't like it when others who haven't worked as hard and broken the rules get the same acceptance and reward they do. Martin Luther said since the fall our hearts have been hard-wired with a 'wages' mentality: we only get what we deserve. We're only worth how well we perform. If we do good things, we will get good outcomes. And if we do bad things, we will get bad outcomes. So when someone does bad things and gets good outcomes? That's insulting. **But that's the economy of grace.**

And that's a scandal we should thank God for, because if God didn't relate to us by grace none of us would have any hope. You see, **the point of this story is not that this woman is a sinner and Simon just has to learn to deal with the fact that Jesus** loves sinners, too. The point is that Simon is a sinner just like this woman; the only difference is that he doesn't realize it. Ironically, she has a leg up on him because she realizes her sinfulness and he doesn't. Because of his upbringing or his privileged place in society or the good education his parents got for him, he may have learned to cloak his sinfulness better than her and behave in more socially acceptable ways, but his heart has the same sickness as hers.

Think of it like the Coronavirus. One of the strange things about this disease is how varying the symptoms can be. Some who contract it have only a slightly elevated temperature and a little fatigue; others, especially if they are older or weaker develop serious lung problems and their vital organs start shutting down. **But it's all the same disease.** If a babysitter walks into your house, picks up your baby and says, "Oh, btw, I have Coronavirus, but don't worry, my symptoms are only mild," my guess is that's not ok. You don't want that disease anywhere near you. (And all God's people, through their masks, said a muffled "Amen.")

God's revulsion against our sinfulness is 10 billion times stronger than the thought of a diseased person holding our baby. In the sight of God, we're all like this woman, only 10 billion times worse. We should thank God that he receives, forgives and embraces sinners because that's all any of us are. The scandal of the gospel is not that Jesus loves bad people, too; it's that he only loves bad people because that's the only kind of people on earth right now!

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt, yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured, there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt. Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within; grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin.

One of the most important and ironic aspects of Jesus' ministry is that sinners felt safe around him. Read the stories in the Gospels. **This woman feels totally comfortable around him.**

- **What this woman does in letter her hair down is very symbolic.** Like I told you, that was a symbol of intimacy; **something women only felt comfortable doing** in front of her husband. Clearly, what she's doing here is not sexual--it represents an intimacy of soul before God. She's saying to Jesus, "You see all of me and accept me as I am"--*Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidst me come to thee, o Lamb of God I come, I come!*

One of the **most ironic and beautiful parts of Jesus' life** is how safe sinners felt around him. In fact, you could say that the safest place in the universe for a sinner to be is completely exposed in the presence of Jesus. If you expose your sin to Jesus, he will receive and forgive you. If you keep it covered, you are on your own.

- This woman, symbolically, exposes her brokenness of soul to Jesus and all she found was love and acceptance.

Jesus' acceptance of her didn't mean, of course, that he affirmed her lifestyle choices or was content to leave her where she was. Her experience of grace changed her. **Grace does not mean accepting or embracing someone's sinful lifestyle; it means loving and embracing them despite their lifestyle.**

I say that because our society teaches us that when it comes to someone's lifestyle, we have only **2 options: affirmation or alienation**. You either affirm them fully or you reject them. But Jesus shows us a third option: speaking truth with grace. **Speaking God's truth to them**, but not in a way that pushes them away or shuts off the relationship.

One of Jesus' most misunderstood teachings in our day is what he says in Matthew 7, "*Judge not, lest you be judged.*" People assume that means you should never tell someone what they are doing is wrong. Or if you do, they say, "*Who are you to judge?*" This is the one verse in the Bible Bill Maher seems to know. **But is that what Jesus meant?** After all, Jesus pointed out people's wrongness all the time--wrongness in what they thought, what they believed, and what they were doing. And so did the Apostles.

So not judging someone can't mean not speaking the truth to them. No, judging them is what you do after you speak the truth to them. Do you cast them away or draw them close? You see, even as Jesus spoke truth to people, he drew them near. He radiated acceptance and love.

I read in my quiet time this week, John 12, where Jesus said that on earth he would never judge anybody.

One day he'll come back as Judge, but in his time on earth, he wouldn't do it; he'd been sent only to extend the acceptance of salvation to all who would receive it. **That's true of us, too**. That means no matter what someone has done, until their dying breath we extend God's acceptance and embrace. That's our only posture toward the world.

That's the scandal of grace; it's the heart of the gospel. And **this scandal, you see, produces 3 things in us**, things that religion by itself, with all its laws and commands and disciplines, can never produce:

1. White-Hot Worship

- If this woman demonstrates nothing else it's an uncontrollable passion over Jesus. She weeps over her sin; she adores with tearful thankfulness his salvation; she pours out a bottle of expensive perfume on his feet.
- Her love is so strong she can't restrain herself.
- **Simon, for all his knowledge and all his religion**, doesn't have any kind of emotion like that in his heart.
- Let me ask you: **When was the last time you wept over your sin and salvation?** If the answer is "never," you have a problem. If the fact that God himself took on for you an eternal Hell that you had brought on

yourself--or the fact that he sought you when you were running the other direction--**if that has never brought tears** to your eyes, you have a serious issue. You say, "Well, I'm just not that emotional of a person." You don't have to be emotional for that to bring tears to your eyes, you just have to be human with some semblance of understanding. And all of you in here, I believe, are human. So if you haven't wept over your salvation I'm questioning whether or not you understand it.

- Jesus said: **Those who are forgiven much, love much.**
- **Again, be clear:** the point is not that this woman needs to be forgiven of A LOT and the Pharisee only of a little. No, both are in great need of forgiveness. One tried to find security and happiness apart from God in prostitution; the other thought he could win God's approval by showing how much better he was than everyone else. **Both rejected God in their own way** and both need to be forgiven. **Her advantage** is she realizes it and he doesn't, which is why she loves Jesus passionately and he doesn't.
- **If your faith is cold, your heart is hard, pray that God opens your eyes to how amazing grace is;** to see how high and wide and deep and long God's love for you actually is.
- **When grace is amazing to you,** worship won't feel like a drudgery, it will be your delight. Coming to church to celebrate God's grace with others won't be something you have to be dragged to; it will be something you can't wait to do.

2. Acceptance of Others

- **Those who believe the gospel become like the gospel.** The acceptance we've received from Jesus forever defines how we receive others. I **don't think that this woman**, from this point, would find herself looking down her nose at others in the church. Because she remembered where she was when Jesus found her.
- It's important how Luke refers to this woman: In **vs. 37**, he calls her a "woman who was a sinner." He identifies her first as a woman--a human being with inherent dignity--maybe someone's sister; someone's daughter; someone's mother. That doesn't mean she's not also a sinner, just that he sees in her first something he can relate to--someone made in the image of God like him, who came into the world with the same needs, hurts and desires.
- **I can't help but wonder how this woman became a prostitute.** We can't be sure, of course. It's **possible that she chose this path** despite a loving father and mother who raised her the right way and provided for her. **That's a possibility. But it's unlikely. What's more likely** is that something happened to her at some point. Maybe she was raped; maybe her husband abandoned her with no way to own land or pay off her debts or get remarried. That's how a lot of women became prostitutes in those days. Maybe her dad sold her off as a little girl to pay off some debts. **Maybe she tried for a while to make money in other ways** but there came a day when she got so desperate that the thought crossed her mind: "**Well, there's always THAT way to make a living. At least I wouldn't starve.**" And then she met a man who didn't care about knowing her name, and she walked away after being used with enough money not to starve. And then again. And again. And with each time the shame became unimaginable and the pain unbearable, but she got into a cycle she just didn't know how to get out of.
- **I'm not saying her actions are justified;** just that those of us not currently walking down a dark path might consider **the darkness some of these people experienced** that led them toward those paths. Or the **undeserved graces** God gave us that kept us out of that darkness.

- **To this woman, Luke says, I see you first as a woman.** I see you as someone whose pain I understand. As someone made in the image of God; whom God loves and whose pain breaks his heart.
- And Jesus said, "That's how I see you, too." *You are not your divorce, you are not your rape, you are not your abuse, you are not your pride, you are not your addiction, you are not your pain, you are not your sin, you are not your past, you are not your future, you are not your stupidity, you are not your bad choices. You are God's child. That's who you are.*

BTW, scholars point out that this story ends with a question. After Jesus accepts this woman, does everybody else? Luke never tells us what happens. Did Simon say, "Pull up a chair, and let's talk theology!" What did the disciples do? We don't know.

It's a question to us, SC: How will we receive sinners?

- **Look at your circle.** Who is in it? How many broken, messed-up people are a part of it? To what tarnished, broken person, that other people shake their heads at, are you showing the acceptance of Christ?

And Summit, if we're going to be a church that stewards this well, we've going to have to get used to our church feeling a little messy. **Sinners don't come in sanctified.** I'm sure this woman brought in all kinds of baggage into the church that took years to deal with.

- Sometimes they don't know all the right things to do in worship, and like this woman they do something **awkward and borderline inappropriate.** *I remember having a man come up to me after a message I preached here; he walked up--you could tell he wasn't your typical church guy--and with tears in his eyes he stuck out his hand and said, "Pastor, that was the best beepety-beepety-beep-beep-beep sermon I've ever heard." I did a double-take, and I thought, "You know, that just might be the most authentic expression of praise uttered in this place this morning." I'm not saying the language he used was ok--and he'll figure that out in time ("Why do none of their songs have curse words in 'em?")--I'm just saying that when lost people find Jesus, it's messy, and I'm ok with that. **Are you?***

Lastly... **3. Extravagant Generosity**

- **Don't overlook in this story that this woman, as an expression of worship, pours out extravagant generosity on Jesus.** As she kneels weeping at Jesus' feet, letting down her hair, she breaks open an expensive bottle of perfume. These perfumes in alabaster flasks, by the way, were precious and very expensive--about a year's salary; they were something you kept for a lifetime; left to your kids. She **breaks it in one motion** and pours out the entirety of its content on Jesus' feet!
- **We know from other accounts that some of the disciples thought this was an incredible waste.** And they said, "If anything, she should have given this to the poor." But Jesus rebuked them and said, "You don't get it. This was worship. Pure worship." And this kind of extravagance is right in light of the extravagance of the forgiveness I gave to her. I don't need her money, but this expression of her worship is right.
- Write this down: *"Some gifts are valuable because of the good they can do in the world; others are valuable for the statement they make about the heart of the giver and the worth of God to whom they are given."*
- Generosity is not first and foremost about meeting budgets or taking care of needs. It's primarily a declaration to God about how valuable he is to you.

- That's been the **heart of what we've done for 2 years now with FIRST**. We've wanted to give in a way that shows that Jesus is first in our lives. I told you about one of our pastors who determined that he was going to make his giving the largest expense each month--bigger than what he paid for his mortgage; bigger than what he was saving for retirement or college; bigger than vacation or car expenses. **In order to do that**, he had to make some changes. That's one way to do it.
- My question for you is **what this looks like for you**.
- My challenge for all of us is that we **give in a way that makes a declaration** to God about his place in our lives.

We're calling this December our [December Declaration](#). **It's a time for some of us to finish the commitment we made 2 years ago strong; it's a time for many of us to start giving on a regular basis**. Maybe you should set up recurring giving so that you can Jesus is FIRST in a consistent, disciplined way.

- **Or maybe some of us will realize there is something in our lives** that we're holding onto that God wants us to transfer into his kingdom. Some gift, some amount from stored resources that it's time to invest in Jesus' kingdom; some gift we offer as an act of worship that declares Jesus is first.

"Some gifts are valuable because of the good they can do in the world; others are valuable for the statement they make about the heart of the giver and the worth of God to whom they are given." What kind of statement is what you're giving going to make?

Can I ask you to **pray through this and consider it**? We're at a very key point in our ministries. Because of **lockdown**, things have been very unusual. And there's a lot of new ministry opportunities in front of us. If you **find yourself resenting** this, I'm not talking to you. Don't do it unless you can do it cheerfully. But **for those of you who believe** in this, it's time to walk forward boldly in faith..

Conclusion

Let me close by pointing out that these 3 things, white-hot worship, acceptance of others, and extravagant generosity correspond to **3 of our discipleship identities**: worshipper, family member (acceptance), and steward (extravagant generosity). We see all 3 of them in this story.

And this is what is most important: **How are these produced?** By a deeper awareness of grace. You never grow in the Christian life by resolving to do better. You don't grow just by doing a GW study. You grow by going deeper into the wonder of your salvation. Growing in the gospel is like drinking from a well; the best water is not found by widening the circumference of the well, but by drilling down deeper into the well. If your heart is cold and the Christian life feels like drudgery, ask God to open your eyes to the wonder of grace. He'll do it. And when wonder fills your heart, passion for the Christian life always follows.

Let's bow our heads right now and you do that.

And let me say to those who find yourself like this woman--maybe filled with regret over mistakes, aware of your sin, unsure about how God feels about you. **The arms of Jesus stand open wide for you**. You say, "No, I've made too many mistakes," or "my mistakes are so bad he couldn't receive me." No, he said that as long as

you are on earth, he stands arms open wide. It's why we say, "if you're not dead, God's not done!" Or, to quote an older song, *"Dark is the stain you cannot hide, what can avail to wash it away? Look there is flowing a crimson tide, whiter than snow you can be today!"* Say to him, *"Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidst me come to thee--O Lamb of God, I come! I come!"*

Will you say that? Raise your hand. Text READY to 33933.