

The Gospel According to Luke
January 20, 2019
Reading: Luke 7:36-50

Sermon #29
Luke 7:36-50

Forgiveness and Love – Part I

Transformation

As we finish up Luke chapter 7, we read a story, a simple story and yet, as always, any time Jesus teaches, there is deep meaning and purpose. This morning we will be laying the foundation by understanding the location, setting and background of this story and finish next week focusing on the lesson being taught and how it is to impact our lives in living as Christians.

Sharing the gospel of Christ or witnessing to the lost is a principal part of a Christian's life. When you think about evangelism – is it missions and missionaries that comes to your mind? Or, one simply can leave sharing the gospel to the professionals – pastors and missionaries. If so, one needs to rethink this logic. When you think of evangelism what is it that has the greatest impact? Is it setting down a step-by-step logical argument for the truth of the Scriptures? Is it persuading someone to believe by the reasonableness of the truths of Scriptures as seen throughout history? How about eternal life – is that the approach that convinces people? Is it heaven versus hell? In evangelism what has the greatest impact on people?

As you share the gospel and I hope this is part of your lifestyle - in the sharing of the gospel one must proclaim the truth. One needs to explain the promises of God fulfilled through Christ and those promises that are yet to be fulfilled. There is a need to know the Scriptures in order to answer questions and show relevance to a person's life. But, the most important, the thing that has the greatest impact, is your testimony of a transformed life. People can debate the scriptures and doctrine, but they cannot debate what Christ has done in your life.

A life that has come alive spiritually and has changed how you think, act and has given you a new life's purpose. History is replete with examples of those who tried hard to witness, but until they shared their testimony of how they had been transformed and people observed their spiritual transformation it did not have impact. Jesus knew transformation was key. Jesus knew in his own ministry of seeking to save the lost that it was a powerful witness to present transformed lives and the Bible is filled with the stories of transformed lives like Abraham, Moses, Joseph, King David and certainly Paul - these are but a few.

Jesus could not use his own life as an example because he was sinless and there was no need to be transformed. So, Jesus used the stories of people transformed to impact the lives of those who needed the gospel in their lives. This is the case with the story laid out before us here at the end of chapter 7. Luke records Jesus giving his purpose for coming to the earth 12 chapters later in his gospel account, **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”** (Luke 19:10) In this story Jesus is seeking a lost Pharisee and by doing so, in the setting of this story, he is also sharing with those who are there listening. Jesus used the transformed life of a woman as a testimony as he reclined at the dining table.

Most people see this story as the story of an immoral woman whose life has brought her to tears. That is not really the primary focus, it is an underlying element of the story. This is a story of Jesus evangelizing as he lives life. He is evangelizing a Pharisee. We just finished learning in chapter 7 that many accused Jesus of being a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. They were saying Jesus was the friend of people we would call low-life, undesirables, but here we see he also associates with the religious elite, a Pharisee. This is not the last time Luke would record Jesus dining with a Pharisee. In chapter 11 we read, **“While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table.”** (Luke 11:37) As on this occasion people were observing how Jesus and this Pharisee interacted with each other. In chapter 14, Luke writes,

“One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.” (Luke 14:1) Jesus was no respecter of class, he came to save sinners from all walks of life.

On this occasion, in Luke chapter 7, Jesus demonstrated His power to forgive sins as a lesson to a self-righteous Pharisee by having compassion and offering forgiveness to someone the Pharisee would consider from the bottom of society. Someone he had distain for and would not want to show any recognition of - let alone allow in his home – a sinner, a prostitute. Jesus demonstrates his authority to forgive and shows love and kindness to someone whose life has been transformed.

The story begins in verse 36, “One of the Pharisees asked ~~him~~ Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table.” Here the narrative starts and flows for it is a story that requires no outline for it unfolds naturally. This is the answer as to why there is not a 3-point outline in your bulletin this morning. The story comes right after, only 2 verses prior, where Jesus is said to be “a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” and now Jesus is shown to also associate with sinners who feel they need no forgiveness – an aloof Pharisee, who is the worst of sinners. A Pharisee is a worse sinner than a tax collector? Worse than a prostitute? Yes, for he is self-centered and self-righteous. He is the worst possible sinner because the most unredeemable of all is the person who thinks he is not a sinner and does not need redemption – a person that believes God is pleased with them just the way they are. This is the worst of sinners – I know for I was one until God reached out and regenerated my soul and opened my spiritual eyes changing my life forever. The Apostle Paul, you will remember, was also was a Pharisee named Saul a prideful and self-righteous man. Jesus changed Saul into Paul and he later wrote to Timothy, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (or as some translations say “Chief”). ¹⁶ But I

received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:15-16) It had become the nature of the Pharisees to see themselves as self-righteous and that they were saved by being the descendants of Abraham and by their own outward religious works. They believed they earned their salvation without relying upon God. They said they looked for the coming of the Messiah, but they did not want a Messiah. So, this story is one of Jesus using a wretched sinner to reach an even worse sinner.

I want to also clear up another misconception about this story and another similar story. There is another story of a woman anointing Jesus' head recorded in Matthew chapter 26 and Mark 14 and John 12. Luke's story is not the same story as found in Matthew, Mark and John. These 3 gospel accounts tell the same story, but it is not the story we are studying this morning. The other gospel accounts tell a story that takes place in a different location – in Judea in the south and we know Luke's story took place in Galilee. The story in the other Gospels accounts takes place later, not long before Jesus was betrayed. The host of the dinner in Luke's account is a Pharisee named Simon and the host of the later story is a leper named Simon. In Luke's story the perfume is poured on Jesus' feet and in the other story on his head. Just because both hosts of the 2 different stories had the name of Simon does not mean they are the same person. Simon was a common name, like my name Bill, everyone knows more than one Bill. How many Simons can you think of? How about Simon Peter and Simon the Zealot they were both apostles or Simon the father of Judas, Simon of Cyrene, Simon the tanner, Simon the leper and Simon the Pharisee and there are more. So, do not confuse these 2 stories for they are not the same story.

Focusing on the story found in Luke that begins in verse 36 a Pharisee named Simon had requested Jesus come and dine with him in his home. This takes place during Jesus' Galilean ministry in the northern part of the country.

Jesus walked through Galilee teaching and preaching in villages and synagogues. The invitation to dine may have come after one of Jesus' teaching times. It was customary to offer to take a rabbi from "out of town" home after the teaching on the Sabbath, just as it used to be considered an honor to invite the Pastor to one's home for a meal after the Sunday worship service. Even though we do not know the exact circumstances, what we do know is this Pharisee has invited Jesus to his home to dine with him.

It would appear on the surface this was a kind offer, that the Pharisee wanted to hear more of Jesus' teaching and might be open to the gospel message. However, I do not believe this is the case. This was a man who belonged to an exclusive group, just as Saul who would become Paul, did. It was a group made up of just a few thousand men and they considered themselves the guardians of God's Law. They set the standard or the law that the Jewish people were expected to live by. They were legalists who believed salvation was of works. Beyond legalists, as can be observed in Saul's behavior before Jesus changed him into Paul, they were self-righteous to the point they could break the law, even though they were to be the keepers of the law, as seen later on in the mock trial of Jesus. Just as is true of our politicians today. Both of these groups had a need for control and it affected everything. Some things will not change until Jesus returns - for the hearts of man is corrupt.

At this point the Pharisees and scribes had collectively determined that Jesus was a blasphemer and a threat to their position of power and control. Just as the politicians now consider Christians a threat because we challenge their sin. The Pharisees had labeled Jesus as a blasphemer because he forgave sins and only God could forgive sins. As I said, on one hand, they said they were looking for the Messiah to come and yet on the other hand they did not want a Messiah and this along with their self-righteousness blinded them to Jesus being the Messiah. You can spend time this week and go back to chapter 5 of Luke and see

this development of the Pharisees becoming the enemy of Jesus. It also struck the stone hard hearts of the Pharisees that Jesus preached against self-righteousness. On top of all this Jesus showed he was no respecter of their position in Jewish society as elevated, as rabbis should have done - because he spent time with and ate with tax collectors and sinners. This meant Jesus belonged to the low-class outcasts within Jewish society and this disqualified him as the Messiah. The religious elite hated Jesus for violating all their man-made rules and laws that they had put into place over hundreds of years as they drifted away from God.

The Pharisees hated John the Baptist because of his convicting teaching and his call for people to repent. The Pharisees were relieved when John was thrown into Herod's prison. They hatred John and wanted nothing to do with him and just as their problem with John was now dealt with – here comes Jesus preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. While the Pharisees rejected John and now Jesus, the people knew their message rang true. Back a few verses in verse 29, look in your Bible beginning at verse 29, Luke records how there was a growing division, “(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John,³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)” Both Luke and Matthew, each in chapter 3 of their gospel accounts, record John's rebuke of the Pharisees, “when ~~he~~ John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” (Matthew 3:7) They rejected John and it was John who said Jesus was the Messiah – so naturally they would reject Jesus

The Pharisees had made up their minds that Jesus was a threat and decided to accuse him of being a blasphemer because in their minds there was no way this man could be the Messiah - so they had begun the process of

accumulating evidence to use against him. This Pharisee, here in Luke 7, wants to get Jesus into a situation where he could use Jesus' words to incriminate him. He wants to use this relaxed environment of dining to gather evidence against Jesus. He is no friend or seeker of truth, but an enemy of truth and Jesus. This was the time of scheming and gathering evidence. It was not until chapter 11 in verse 37 that another Pharisee asked Jesus to dine with him in an attempt to get Jesus to incriminate himself and when that failed we read at the end of that event the hostility becomes more public, "As ~~he~~ *Jesus* went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, ⁵⁴ lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say." (Luke 11:53-54) By this time the Pharisees wanted Jesus dead, like John, so he would no longer be a threat. But at the time of the story here in Luke chapter 7 it is still the fact gathering time to build a case against Jesus.

The storm led by the prince of this world against Jesus is gathering and this Pharisee is playing his part in his attempt to gather evidence against Jesus. This Pharisee is a leader in this town and he is taking advantage of this to try and change people's view of Jesus. He invites Jesus for a meal and we need to understand that it was not for just a quick meal. In the ancient near east this would have been a meal of food and conversation that would last for hours. So, they reclined at a low table. Normally, it should have been a time of relaxation, good food and conversation. However, that was not the Pharisee's purpose.

Jesus was not taken by surprise, as the only begotten of God the Father, he knew this man's intentions and his desire to serve evil. Jesus, none the less, accepts the Pharisee's offer because he was always seeking the lost and offering salvation. Jesus would use this time to set truth before this Pharisee and all gathered. There would have been a low table with cushions around it so the guests could recline and relax. Joyce and I experienced this same atmosphere overseas where rooms often had no chairs, but cushions. Feet were to be washed

as one entered the house and turning the bottom of the foot towards your host or guest was a sign of disrespect. My mom would always send us to wash our hands before coming to the table and we did the same with our children and do the same with our grandchildren. We do not wear shoes in our house – a custom picked up from living and working overseas. But we do **not** ask people to wash their feet before coming to the table. So, the atmosphere that Luke is describing is normally one of honoring your guests and taking time to separate from the business of the world to enjoy fellowship.

This type of meal would have also been a community affair. I would like you to build a mental picture of this event. Those who were considered of elevated status within the community would expect to be invited. Those of high status expected to be seated at the meal with the Pharisee and rabbi Jesus, and those with less status around the room near the meal. A servant might serve these attendees. The doors of the house would have been opened to allow others of the town to come in and observe the conversation among the important people of their town and still others would crowd around the doors and windows hoping to hear. Remember there were no newspapers at the time and this is how people passed information and heard important news. So, the meal would have truly been a community event and also an opportunity for the Pharisee to demonstrate his status. If he could gather information to hurt Jesus – great, if he could discredit Jesus before the people of the community even better.

So now we understand the setting and background for this meal and the motives of the key people – the Pharisee and Jesus.

Verse 37 begins, “**behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner ...**” The word “**behold**” is used to bring attention – to say, what follows - you need to listen to and pay attention to. Something important is to follow or in this case something shocking. It was not shocking that a poor person would come to the Pharisee’s house when there was an event of this importance. What was shocking was “**a**

[woman of the city](#)” or as we might say a “worldly woman”, a woman who was a sinner entered the Pharisee’s house. This type of woman would be shunned by all, including men who were at the Pharisee’s house and were also her customers. Luke uses the phrase [“a woman of the city, who was a sinner”](#) to most likely indicate she was a prostitute. Everyone would have known her by sight or would have known of her. She lived by plying her trade and the ‘nice’ women of the community would not want their husbands or sons anywhere near her. By the way, this woman was **not** Mary Magdalene. Mary is introduced by Luke in the 2nd verse of chapter 8, just a few verses from this story, so, if it had been Mary Magdalene at the Pharisee’s house Luke would certainly have identified her in this story that comes just before chapter 8. This woman is not identified other than she is sinful indicating she is mostly likely a prostitute. Luke says she is a sinner and this is a label he uses a number of times in his gospel account to designate an un-regenerated person, a person whose life is marked their sinfulness. James uses the word [“sinners”](#) in the same way, [“Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”](#) (James 4:8) Both Luke and James use of the word [“sinners”](#) showing disdain or one of low status of one who is an un-regenerated sinner. In the Pharisee’s position he would have known or had a list of the towns sinners to keep them out of the synagogue and avoid doing business with them – people like; tax collectors, thieves, drunkards, camel drivers (*their livelihood was earned by way of camels who are unclean*), prostitutes, etc.

So, a low-caste woman who was distained by most of the town had learned that Jesus, who some call prophet and some are beginning to call Messiah was to dine at the Pharisee’s house. This out-caste woman knew that many would be gathered at the Pharisee’s house – doors and windows would be open. This is certainly a contrast with celebrations today. If one has an important guest or event it is by invitation only – gates are manned and uninvited people are kept out. Socially it is a different world today. This woman is drawn to this event and she develops a plan that includes bringing an [“alabaster flask of ointment”](#).

Perfume would have been a normal part of the life of a prostitute to mask smells. It was also part of the life of women; if she had the means, women carried perfume or scented ointment to help with smells, this was common at the time of Jesus. If we went back in time to this event we would struggle with the smells. Joyce and I had times when smells would overwhelm us as we worked overseas. Gradually over time we became use to the smells, but even then, there were times it was difficult. So, ointment or perfume was used to mask smells. This ointment is not cheap perfume, but we know it was costly because it was contained in an alabaster flask. At that time alabaster was most likely quarried in Egypt, filled with the costly ointment and sealed, and brought to Israel by caravan and sold in the market. This also tells us this woman was successful in her business for her to be able to afford this costly ointment. In the synagogue Sabbath meeting space was often tight as people came in and a small amount of ointment placed between the lip and nose would help greatly with the smells. Archeologists have unearthed thousands of these flasks and this supports the thought that ointments and perfumes were common at this time.

This woman has a plan to try and get close to Jesus and pour out this costly ointment upon his head to honor him. Pouring oil or perfumed oil upon one head was a sign of respect and honor and I believe this was her original plan. This dinner may have been in the evening because this would have aided this woman in approaching and entering the Pharisee's house undetected. The people of the town were welcome, but not this woman. The Pharisee would consider having this woman in his house an outrage. But somehow, she does indeed slip in unnoticed. How she stayed unnoticed we do not know but she works her way to where Jesus is and in verse 38, we read she is, "[standing behind him at his feet](#)" while he reclined. She waited for an opportunity to anoint Jesus' head. She has been drawn there and she wants to show honor toward Jesus. Why? This is what we will examine next week.

Well, we now have a better understanding of the background of this event, who those present are – Pharisee, Lord Jesus, prostitute and towns people. We also have a better understanding of the customs and traditions of this time. The foundation has been built and next week we will explore Jesus' purpose and teaching, and how this has application to our own lives. So, next Lord's Day come and hear the rest of the story.

Let me close out time in prayer. Father, we thank you for everything you have packed into your Word, the life breathing Word of your Bible. Teach us and penetrate our hearts to change us into believers who live more Christ-like lives. Amen!