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Luke 7:36-50

Sixth Message

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THE SWEET TASTE OF FORGIVENESS

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

As we enter 1994 we return to a series of messages which we began last summer on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. We will immerse ourselves once more in these marvelous, mysterious texts which formed such a critical part of Jesus' teaching ministry to his disciples. Our text today is Luke 7:36-50, the parable of the two debtors.

I want to begin this morning by quoting from a 1960's song by Simon and Garfunkel. It is a rather short song but it is one that is long on sadness:

Time it was and what a time it was,
It was...a time of innocence, a time of confidences.
Long ago...it must be...I have a photograph,
Preserve your memories, they're all that's left you.

The composers were remembering something that had been lost: an innocence, a passion, a hope. These lines reflect a wishing, a longing that life could begin again. Most of us have felt this longing resonating deep within our souls. If only we could turn back the clock and begin again. If only we could have one more chance. For many, this wish centers around forgiving others or being forgiven. Some must bear the pain of knowing they have inflicted harm on others; some have regrets over living outside of the will of God. They long to be able to go back and make things right, to start all over again.

If life were a computer game, this would be easy, wouldn't it? Taking a wrong turn, meeting a monster or facing defeat presents no lasting problems in computer games. All one has to do is erase the mistake, or hit the reset button, and begin again. But life doesn't work that way. "Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph." How sweet life would be if we could find forgiveness, start over again and do it right next time.

So we come to the parable of the two debtors. We have already learned that in the parables, Jesus used the language of the Holy Spirit both to train his disciples and to confront and expose Pharisaical ideas and self-righteous perceptions. In his parables, Jesus penetrates our defenses, bypasses our pre-conceived notions and confronts us with truth that forces us to think through issues. Most of the parables in the gospel of Luke occur in what has been called the Travel Narrative, chapters 9-19, which deal with the time when Jesus and the disciples were journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem. Our text this morning however, verses 36-50 of chapter 7, precedes this time. Here we will discover that there is indeed a way to begin again, there is a way to forgiveness and renewal. Jesus' words will show us what is required of us, and how sweet forgiveness can taste.

I will begin by reading the text; then I will make some observations on it; and finally, I will draw four spiritual implications from this story of the two debtors.

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him. And He entered the Pharisee's house, and reclined at the table. And behold, there was a woman in the city who was a sinner;

and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet, and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner."

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." "A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." And 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 wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." And those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50 NASB)

This incident from the life of Jesus is made up of seven scenes relayed in inverted fashion. In other words, the passage moves in a stair-step fashion towards a center and then retreats back. Scenes one and seven balance, scenes two and six balance, and likewise scenes three and five. The parable, which is scene four, comes in the center of the text. This is bracketed by an exchange between Jesus and a Pharisee named Simon, and their exchange in turn is bracketed by the actions of a certain woman. Scene one is an introduction and scene seven is the conclusion.

The opening verses introduce the three major characters in this incident: the Pharisee, Jesus, and a "woman in the city who was a sinner." Jesus had accepted Simon's invitation to come to his home to dine with him. It is likely that Jesus had preached in the community, and afterwards he was invited by Simon to come to his home for a meal and to engage in debate. A religious society of that day, the *haberim*, held meals in common for the purpose of religious study. Often a visiting sage or teacher would be invited to participate, and debate would go on well into the night. This may have been the context of Simon's invitation to Jesus.

When the gospels speak of “reclining at table,” they are referring to a banquet, actually a public affair. A table and couches were set in the center of the room and people from the community assembled by the outer wall of the house, listening to the debate going on inside. The presence of the general public brought great honor to those reclining at the table.

The woman, referred to in the text as a “woman in the city who was a sinner,” probably was a prostitute. She entered either with Jesus or just before him. (Her dramatic actions began, according to Jesus, “from the time I came in.”) She probably had heard Jesus proclaim the freely offered love of God for sinners, and she had come to make a grateful response.

The cultural key to this story centers on the notion of hospitality. Visiting guests arriving for dinner would take off their shoes and leave them at the door, and servants would greet them by pouring water on their feet. If this courtesy were not followed, the implication was that the visitor was one of inferior rank. Guests reclined at table, their feet drawn up underneath and behind them, because of the offensive, unclean nature of feet in Oriental society.

The host would greet his guests with a kiss. Equals were kissed on the cheek. A student/disciple would kiss the rabbi’s hands; the servant his master’s hand; the son his parents’ hands. (Kissing the feet was the supreme act of devotion and honor.) The guest’s head would be anointed with olive oil, which was cheap and plentiful, and commonly used for this purpose.

Notice that Simon omitted all these three signs of hospitality and greeting with Jesus. Since he called Jesus “Rabbi,” the least he should have done was kiss his hands; but Simon, a judgmental host, callously failed to greet Jesus even with this minimum gesture. This was an unmistakable insult. In our culture it would be like opening the front door to someone’s knock and just standing mute at the door or walking away, leaving the door open. One would expect at minimum some sort of greeting: a word of welcome, an invitation to enter and sit down, an offer of something to drink or eat. But Jesus received no such greeting. Instead, Simon insulted him. He had shown his colors, and now everyone was waiting to see how Jesus would respond to the Pharisee’s calculated slight.

But notice how the woman, the “sinner,” greeted Jesus. In very dramatic fashion she does for him what Simon should have done. Seeing how Simon insulted Jesus, she responds by expressing her devotion to the Lord, forgetting that she was in the presence of a circle of men who were hostile to her also. She stands behind Jesus, by his feet, and she washes, kisses, and anoints them. (The first three verbs are participles: *bringing, standing, weeping*; the last three verbs are past tense: *wiped, kissed, anointed*.)

Approaching Jesus then, the woman begins to weep and to wet his feet with her tears. The washing of the feet was probably unintentional because she does not have a towel; instead she uses her hair to wipe them. A woman’s letting down her hair was an intimate, tender gesture, one that was to be done only in the presence of one’s husband. The Talmud indicates that a woman could be divorced by her husband for letting down her hair in the presence of another man. Furthermore, the rabbis considered uncovering the bosom and loosening the hair actions that fell into the same category. This woman’s letting down her hair in the presence of men was a shocking sight. The atmosphere in the home of the Pharisee must have been electric.

Then the woman began to kiss the feet of Jesus. She could not greet him with a kiss on the cheek (such an action would be hopelessly misunderstood), and so she kissed his feet. Literally, the text says, “she kissed them again and again.” Her action demonstrates great honor, respect and devotion. The third action of the woman was to anoint the feet of Jesus. She had come prepared with perfume which she carried in a flask around her neck. This was used both to sweeten her breath and perfume her body, doubtless an important element for a woman who probably was a prostitute. But now, having found forgiveness, she doesn’t need the perfume any longer, so she comes prepared to pour it on Jesus’ feet. For her to anoint his head would be unthinkable. Samuel, could anoint Saul and David on the head, but a sinful woman could not anoint a rabbi in that way. As a servant, however, she could anoint his feet and thereby show honor to his noble person.

Simon’s refusal to honor Jesus in the customary fashion indicated that he regarded his guest to be of inferior rank, but the woman’s actions bestowed on Jesus the honor of a nobleman in the house of a king.

Simon’s response to the actions of the woman reveals his purpose for inviting Jesus to his home: he wanted to test the claim that Jesus was a prophet. The Pharisee’s language is contemptuous; he refers to Jesus as “this.” The Greek word for “touching” can also mean “to light a fire.” It is used of sexual intercourse in Gen 20:6; Prov 6:29; 1 Cor 7:1. This was not intended here, but Simon’s use of this word in this context had clear sexual overtones. He implies that what the woman was doing was improper, and if Jesus knew what sort of person she was (which he would if he were truly a prophet), he would have nothing to do with her. Jesus responds by saying, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” This exact phrase was used in the Middle East to introduce a blunt speech that the listener might not necessarily want to hear.

The parable is the center of the story, just as in Luke 18:18-30. There, the moneylender extends the same grace to each of two debtors. Both were unable to pay, and in need of grace; the only difference was the amount of each man’s debt. The Aramaic word for debt and sin is the same. The comparison is to Simon and the woman. They are both sinners, they are both in debt, but one loves and the other does not; one sees the magnitude of the debt, the other does not. Jesus asks Simon a question: “Which of them therefore will love him more?” Simon realizes he is trapped. Lamely he tries to escape by saying, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.”

Jesus’ next words are addressed to Simon, but he delivers them facing the woman. If he were facing Simon, we might expect his tone to be harsh, but as he speaks facing the woman, his words are filled with gentleness and gratitude. They are expressed to a daring woman in desperate need of forgiveness and grace. “Do you see this woman?” said Jesus. “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 she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume.”

Jesus is pointing out in no uncertain terms Simon’s lack of hospitality. In any society, a guest is expected to show appreciation for the hospitality extended him no matter how meager it might be; no matter what was set before him, the guest would say again and again that he was unworthy of the hospitality extended to him. To attack the quality of hospitality offered, regardless of the circum-

stances, is unknown in fact or fiction, in personal experience or in traditional story. But Jesus attacks the quality of the hospitality of Simon's home.

Finally, Jesus forgives the woman. More accurately, he announces a forgiveness that has already taken place. Thus he acts in God's stead in the announcing of forgiveness and in the receiving of gratitude. The men in the room are at least puzzled, at worst offended. The faith of the woman has saved her, not her works.

Now we come to the spiritual principles in this story and parable. Here is the first one I see: *If we are to experience forgiveness, we need a true view of our sin and our need for God's grace.*

Simon completely misjudged what was happening on that evening. He labels sin in terms of the woman, referring to her as a "sinner" in verse 39, and thereby rejects the sincerity of her repentance. He claims that Jesus does not see the woman clearly, that he does not know her, but it is evident that Jesus does know her (v. 47). Her actions are not the defiling caresses of an impure woman, but the outpouring of love from a repentant heart. Jesus has not only read the woman's heart, he has read Simon's heart as well. He redefines sin and exposes Simon's unwillingness to acknowledge and confess his sin.

The story is a paradox. The great, unrepentant sinner is Simon, not the woman; the judge becomes the accused. The drama began with Jesus coming under scrutiny, but soon the tables are turned and Simon's sin is exposed. Simon has a problem: he cannot see his own sin clearly and thus his need for God's grace. He doesn't think he is in debt.

We suffer from the same distorted vision as Simon. Jesus once said that the eye is the lamp of the body. If the eye is clear or healthy, he said, if we see truly, with clear vision, then our whole body will be full of light. But if our eye is bad, then our whole body will be full of darkness.

Last week I set out with my children early in the morning for a ski trip. When we reached the valley, dense fog had settled in. It was so thick I could hardly read the exit signs. I crawled along, driving as carefully as I could as heavy trucks roared by. After an hour or so of these conditions, at last we reached the foothills. The fog began to dissipate. Suddenly, everything cleared up. The sky was blue; the gray hues gave way to brilliant colors. I thought to myself how often we are in a fog when it comes to our own sin and shortcomings, and how difficult it is for us to see these things and admit to them.

The story and the parable shatter our pharisaical notions about sin and sinners. Jesus came to Simon in the same way that Nathan came to David—to confront him and show him reality. It is easy to see sin in others, but hard to see it in ourselves. If we think we need but a little forgiveness, we are in big trouble. The amount of the debt is unimportant. Now matter how much someone else might owe, we are in a debit crisis ourselves. Jesus' advice to us is to take our eyes off of others and look to our own need for forgiveness. Our self-righteousness prevents us getting a true view of our own sin. Being critical of the weaknesses in others is a tell-tale sign of our own disease. John Owen said, "he who has slight thoughts of sin never has great thoughts of God."

I learned this the hard way just a couple of weeks ago. Christmas is always a time of busyness and frenetic activity, and this one was no exception. The week before the holiday, my wife told me that she was way behind schedule. She was in trouble, she said. But I

did not respond like Jesus. I acted like Simon. I became critical and judgmental of what I regarded as her shortcomings. Of course, I saw myself as one without debt; she was the problem. As I meditated on this text after Christmas, and after my wife rebuked me, I began to see my own sin. God showed me how ugly my own attitude had been. I was the one in need of God's grace, not my wife.

If we are to experience forgiveness, then we must be humble confessors, not proud blamers.

Here is the second principle I see in this story and parable: *God's love and his offer of grace is available to both the righteous and the unrighteous, to the religious and the non-religious.*

There are two words used for forgiveness in this text. The word in verse 42 comes from the word "grace." It means "to give cheerfully, freely." The idea is to make a gift. Here it means that the moneylender gave a gift of what the debtors owed and so forgave their debts. In other words, the lender forgave the debtors by assuming their debts himself. And this too is the wonderful good news of the gospel: God through Christ assumed our debt.

Jesus uses a different word for forgiveness in verse 48. This word means "to release, let go, cancel." Our sins are finally and completely canceled, totally obliterated by the work of Christ. Not a trace of them remains before a holy God. "As far as the east is from the west," says the Scripture, "so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Only God in Christ can do this.

There are two sinners in the story, Simon and the woman. Simon sins within the law, the woman without the law. The woman hears the message of forgiveness and she embraces the Son of God. Simon defines a prophet as one who avoids sinners. Jesus, the true prophet, gives himself in costly love and becomes the agent of God's forgiveness. Simon sees the woman as a sinner; Jesus sees her as a worshipper. Simon is embarrassed by her; Jesus lets her touch him.

But notice that Jesus offers God's grace to Simon as well. The fact that Jesus was a friend of sinners did not mean that he was unwilling to be a friend of the respectable and self-righteous. He is not afraid to challenge a room full of Pharisees; he is not put off by their scorn and contempt. He knows that Simon needs forgiveness just as much as the woman does. The issue, of course, is that everyone in debt; we all need to be forgiven. Forgiveness is not measured, it is not more or less; it is all or nothing. The only requirement is faith.

I remember the first time in my life when I experienced feelings of guilt and the need for forgiveness. I was probably about 8 years old. My brother had a pet rabbit, and my friend and I took it out of its cage. We stood on our picnic table outside and threw the rabbit high in the air and laughed as it landed on its feet. We enjoyed doing this so much we did it again and again. After awhile the rabbit didn't land quite so adroitly, and we put it back in its cage. Next morning I found it dead. I can still remember the horrible, sickening feeling I had. I would have done anything to rid myself of that feeling.

Have you ever felt that your sin was so terrible that God would never forgive you? Have you thought to yourself that your life could never be put right again? "Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph; preserve your memories, they're all that's left you." Jesus came to die for you, to forgive your debt. The woman in this story shows us that no debt is too great for God to forgive. Simon is an example to us that religious pride can stand in the way of receiving forgiveness.

When we are mired in sin, even when we despair of ever being able to make things right, we can still be too proud to throw our-

selves in total dependence on God. We may express to others our wish for a fresh start, yet we choose to stay entrenched in self-pity and despair because we refuse to give up control. But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus hears the cries of guilt-ridden outcasts; he breaks down the walls of the arrogant and the respectable; and to both he offers grace and forgiveness. No matter who we are, no matter what we have done we can embrace him and taste the sweetness of his love. Here is how the psalmist put it: "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him" (Ps 103:11).

Here is the third principle I find in this text: *The result of experiencing forgiveness is a heart of love towards God, and acceptance of others.*

In the woman's dramatic actions, weeping, kissing and anointing, we see a heart filled with love and gratitude towards God. What we see in Simon's response, on the other hand, is a hard and unloving heart. The phrase, "for she loved much," is to be taken as the result of her being forgiven, not the reason for the forgiveness. We could take it to read, "her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, therefore she loved much." Hearing Jesus speak, the woman could scarcely believe her ears. Not in her wildest dreams could she imagine God accepting and forgiving her. As a result of tasting such sweet forgiveness, she comes to the dinner and responds towards Jesus with an outpouring of love.

But the contrary is also true: "he who is forgiven little, loves little." Simon has no real awareness of the nature of the evil in his life. He sees himself with few spiritual debts, and thus not in need of grace. This does not mean that his sins are few and therefore he needs only a little of God's grace; it means that he has many sins but that he has little awareness of them and has not repented. Consequently, having received little grace, he shows little if any love.

The implication is that there is a link between love and forgiveness. And there is. Forgiveness precedes love. Love is proportional to our grasp of the magnitude of our sin and the subsequent sweetness of tasting God's forgiveness. That was what caused love and gratitude to gush forth from the heart of this woman toward Jesus. That is what triggers genuine and costly acts of love, which are expressions of thanks for grace received, not attempts to gain more or a means to remove guilt. We do not love so as to find forgiveness or to remove guilt. We are forgiven, and this results in love of God. Whenever we see an outpouring of love from someone we can be sure that something has happened between that person and God.

This truth should prod us to do some self-evaluation. If we are having trouble loving, if we find we do not have a heart of gratitude, then perhaps we need to evaluate our experience of forgiveness. Have we been forgiven much? Love and thankfulness are prime indicators of our relationship with God. If the spring doesn't bubble, the problem may lie at the source.

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of going to a friend's house for dinner one evening. Over the fireplace was carved an inscription in German. When Chuck asked what it said, his host translated: "If your heart is cold, my fire cannot warm it." Doing good things cannot create in us a warm, loving heart. Only God can do this, and he does it only when we see ourselves for who we are and throw ourselves solely on his grace.

And finally, our last principle: *God even uses our sin to draw us into intimacy with him.*

How paradoxical! Simon works hard at avoiding any contact with sin, even with sinners. He imagines that any confession of sin or admission of guilt will destroy his relationship with God. But the exact opposite is true. The woman demonstrates that confession of sin results in forgiveness and intimacy with God. The very thing that Simon is seeking to avoid, the very thing he thinks will keep him from God is the very thing that God uses in the woman's life to bring about joy, intimacy and love—the things that Simon could never attain through religious performance.

Many of you are parents. How do you respond to your children when they come to you weak and struggling? Do you cast them out for failing? Do you reject them? Would you rather have a perfect child, or a child who struggles but clings to you?

Some time ago I met in the church parking lot a young man who is in a discipleship group with me. He was trembling, and he told me he needed to talk. He confided to me that he had relapsed into smoking dope. The tension of appearing to be something he was not was tearing him up inside. How do you think I responded? Did I cast him out of the city and refuse to talk to him? Hardly. I told him that in a way I had expected this to happen. We prayed, and I asked him to share it with our discipleship group at our next meeting. When he did he found acceptance, support and prayer, not rejection. God used this area of sin to bring a greater sweetness and genuineness to his faith.

God can use what seems ugly to us to deepen our experience of his compassion and loyal-love. This could never be Simon's experience, however. In his eyes he had done nothing wrong.

This story has been retold time and time again. It is told whenever someone embraces God's grace and tastes the sweetness of forgiveness. If we learn from the actions of this woman, this "woman in the city who was a sinner," then we will not have to sing that sad song of long-ago memories. Rather, we can live in the present, with a freshness, hope, and acceptance that will cause our hearts to overflow with gratitude and praise toward God. Then Jesus will say to us, as he said to the woman in the home of the Pharisee, "Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

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