

The Heart of Salvation

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[0:00] This morning is from the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 7, and you'll find it on page 1036 in your Bibles. Beginning to read verse 36.

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house.

So she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears.

Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of a woman she is, that she is a sinner.

Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, he said. Two people owed money to a certain moneylender.

[1:13] One owed him 500 denarii and the other 50. Neither of them had the money to pay him back. So he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?

Simon replied, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven. You have judged correctly, Jesus said. Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman?

I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet. But she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You did not give me a kiss. But this woman from the time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head. But she has poured perfume on my feet.

Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.

[2:17] Then Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven. The other guests began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins?

Jesus said to the women, Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Thank you, Ruth, for reading that. And as Ruth said, it's on page 1036 in the Church Bible. So if you've not looked that up, and you've got one around, it would be really helpful just to look at Luke chapter 7 so that we can just follow it together.

As we have this time in God's word. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet to follow if you'd find that helpful. But as we turn to God's word, let's ask for God's help. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to hear you speak to us and to learn what you are like as we see the Lord Jesus. And we ask that you will open our ears to hear, open our minds to understand, and open our hearts to respond rightly to you.

[3:30] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. The story of Les Misérables is a terrific story. Maybe you've seen the musical or you've watched one of the TV adaptations or film adaptations.

Some of you will even have read the book. It's set in the years of the French Revolution. A convict called Jean Valjean steals a loaf of bread and he's sent to a quarry to do endless years of hard labor where he becomes a harder and harder man.

Then he escapes parole. So he's on the run seeking refuge and he happens to knock on the door one night of a bishop's house. And we've got a bishop with us today.

Well, the bishop who meets with Jean Valjean is a good man and he lets him in and he brushes him up. And as they're sitting at supper, the bishop says to him, Is there anything else I can do for you apart from a meal and a bed for the night?

Valjean says to him, No, one night under your roof and I will be a new man. But he's lying. Midnight comes and Valjean creeps downstairs and he grabs all the silver he can find to make off with it.

[4 : 44] The bishop comes down, disturbed, and Valjean hits him over the head, knocking him to the floor and he escapes. The next morning, there is a knock on the bishop's door and it's the police with Valjean and they say to the bishop, Bishop, we found him, the man who stole your silver.

And he says, Stole my silver? You must have misunderstood. I gave these things to him. And then he goes back to the table and he gets these two great candlesticks, silver candlesticks, and he hands them to Valjean and he says, Didn't you remember I said you could have the candlesticks as well?

So the police are dispatched and the bishop turns back to Valjean and he says, You said to me last night, one night under my roof and you would be a new man.

So be it. And Valjean is completely transformed. He rises to become a respected mayor, a reformed character, until a new police chief is appointed in the area who happens to be a former guard at the quarry and he recognizes Valjean and he knows that he ran away.

And the story becomes a chase between the police officer, Jarve, and Valjean that reveals two utterly opposed visions for life. In one vision, there is forgiveness and people change.

[6 : 03] And in the other vision, there is law and people are what they are. If you break the law, you face the consequences and people never really change. And there's a scene in Paris where Jarve and Valjean meet each other and Valjean has a pistol and Jarve says to him, go on, shoot me.

And Valjean says, no. And Jarve says, you know, if you don't, I will pursue you for the rest of your life. Why don't you kill me? And Valjean says, because you are dead already.

Two visions for what life can be about. In one, there is forgiveness and there is life. In the other, there is only law and living death. Now, Luke chapter 7 brings us into a similar story of those two visions.

Only this one is a real event and it's about real life, about yours and mine. Simon, at whose house this takes place, his vision is of life without forgiveness.

Moral law fills his horizon. If you keep it, you earn credit with God and if you fall short, you've got to face the consequences and you'll never change.

[7 : 14] Then Jesus comes in and we see his vision for life where every single one of us on our own merit is a no-hoper when it comes to God. We've lost our way but free forgiveness is offered to all and people who experience that forgiveness really can change.

So let's get into the scene. Verse 36, Simon is a Pharisee so he's a religious leader and he invited Jesus to have dinner with him and they reclined at the table.

That's literally how they would have sat down around the table in those days, in that place. They would be sitting at a table but reclining back with their legs behind them and their feet at the back.

And then this woman approaches Jesus. Now what is she doing here? Well, this is still how evenings work in lots of parts of the world where you have a wealthy house where there'll be a courtyard.

It would have been like this. And Simon would have had a table for his family and his respected guests to have dinner with him. But because he's a charitable man, the doors to the courtyard would be open and people from the town could come in and they could stay around the edges in the shadows.

[8:28] And if there was leftover food, they would be fed as well to look after them. That's how we get this situation where there is a woman who is not invited. And verse 37, she approaches Jesus.

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house. So she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.

She stands behind Jesus and I don't think she planned what happens next. Clearly she's already heard Jesus. She's seen Jesus as many thousands have, because she approaches him and she's standing by her feet behind him and she starts to cry and her tears fall on his feet.

And then she does something culturally very shocking. It was a very intimate thing to do in a culture where women would have had their hair tied up under a scarf.

You would only let down your hair at home. A woman would do that for her husband's eyes. But this woman, a notorious sinner, lets her hair down. Because she uses it to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair.

[9:39] Then she kisses his feet. Then she breaks open the alabaster jar and she pours the perfume from it onto his feet. Now, alabaster jars didn't have stoppers on them.

So you break the jar, everything goes. This is probably the most valuable thing the woman owns. It's an extravagant expression of sacrifice as she pours it on Jesus' feet.

Well, to Simon, this is a scandal. And so our first point on the sheet is about him. He is the host who shows us the offense of forgiveness. Have a look with me at verse 39.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would know who was touching him and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner.

So just think about how Simon views the world. Evidently, he thinks when you do good things, you get credit in your account with God. You earn approval from God.

[10:42] He believes in the God who accepts the good people and shuts out the bad people. This is the guy who is very charitable, who paid for the town's night shelter for the homeless.

He doesn't smoke. He doesn't vape. He sorts his recycling out. Last year, he did a sponsored Iron Man for children in need. And he thinks to himself, if Jesus really is a prophet, if he really is a man from God, he would know what I'm like, what a good person I am, and he'd know what this woman was like, and he would have nothing to do with her right now.

On the other hand, Simon is thinking, if this woman is accepted by God, well, that devalues everything that I've been working for, all the credit that I've worked to build up in my account by my good deeds.

And tragically, that means that for Simon, his good works are his downfall. Do you see that? They mean that he doesn't think he needs to come to Jesus to be forgiven by God.

And the idea that people can be given a fresh start with God, whoever you are, and whatever you've done, that is deeply offensive to Simon.

[11:57] And it's worth pausing to ask ourselves, isn't this so often what the world is like that we live in today? We live in a world where whoever it is that you spend time with, they've got expectations for you, imposed on you.

You've got to conform. You've got to live in a certain way for their approval. You've got to measure up. You've got to think a certain way. You've got to have the right opinions. You've got to live a certain way.

You've got to vote a certain way to be accepted. So we're used to being judged by people's standards. And if you make it, you get proud and you join their circle and you can look down on others.

And if you don't make it, you get cancelled. You know, if you mess up, they want nothing to do with you. So what does God say? Well, we've seen the host who shows us the offence of forgiveness.

Secondly, the debtors who show us our need for forgiveness. Now there's a great little detail here and it's in verse 40. Look how it begins. Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you.

[13:02] Well, Simon wasn't expecting an answer, was he? Because he's thinking to himself, if this man really was a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is.

And Jesus shows that he really is a prophet because he knows exactly what Simon is thinking and he addresses it head on. He tells Simon a simple story. He says, imagine two people and they both owe money to the same money lender and one of them owes two months wages and one of them owes two years wages.

And in verse 42, he says, neither of them had the money to pay him back. Well, the money lender in the story is a picture for us of the living God and the debt these people owe is a picture of their sin.

Sin is the Bible's word for how each of us has mistreated God in our hearts. We were meant and made by God to make him the center of our lives as central as a rugby ball is to a rugby game.

But instead, we don't live our lives centered on God, living lives thankful to God and giving glory to God. Instead, we build our lives on other things. They might be really good things that we choose to build our lives on.

[14:19] If you build your life on your career or your family or your friendships, you will be a respectable person. Simon, here in this story, was respectable.

There would have been many good things that he did but ultimately he did them for himself and not for God. Even if he was doing them as a religious person, he was doing them to earn approval from God, perhaps out of a sense of fear before God.

And Jesus tells the story like this because he wants us to know and Simon to know that every single person has a debt before God. What we must not do, which is what Simon did, is play the compare game.

Lots of us do that. We grade other people. We think, well, they're worse than me so we feel righteous. It happens in schools. It happens in friendship groups.

It happens in prison. I once spent time in prison as a chaplain, just to be clear. Because I need you to approve of me. And so, I was once in prison as a chaplain and it was striking that even in prison I had people saying to me as they met me, you know, I'm not like that other lot over there.

[15:36] You know, like I've never stabbed anyone. I've never done anything to a kid. Even in prison, people grading themselves so that they feel I'm justified.

I'm righteous. That's what we love to do. We look for people who are worse than us. So that we can feel we are good. Well, God says in the Bible, every single one of us has fallen short of the glory of God.

And I hope that for all of us, if we're being honest with ourselves today, we would be willing to admit that, that we're not the people we ought to be. If the five worst things that you've ever thought or said or done were put up on a screen now for everyone else here to see, you wouldn't be staying around for cake and coffee.

Well, when it comes to God, he's made clear, we mustn't think that we've built up some credit in our account with him for when we stand before him. We are all like the debtors in Jesus' story before that money lender.

So that's our second point, our need for forgiveness. But thirdly, we see the woman. The woman who displays the proof of forgiveness. Why is she weeping at Jesus' feet?

[16:53] Well, remember our two debtors. One of them owes two months' wages. The other one owes two years' wages. And verse 42, Jesus says, neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both.

And Jesus asks Simon, which of them will love him more? And Simon says, verse 43, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.

And fair play to Simon, he gets that one right. He says, Jesus says, you've judged correctly. Now we bank with Nationwide and our kids got letters earlier this year from Nationwide.

They went out to all their clients, all their customers, in view of our recent results, everyone is getting 50 pounds in their bank account. Euphoria in our house.

50 quid! What a bonus! That was a great day. Imagine if they sent a message to everyone who has a loan and everyone who has a mortgage saying, we've decided to cancel the debts.

[18:07] You're free to go. Nothing to pay back. What a day that would be. No money lender has that business model. Imagine the AGM for Nationwide after that decision.

It would be madness. Extraordinary. Mad generosity. And you see, the wonderful thing here is that when it comes to God, that's the message that Jesus has been sent to bring.

In chapter 4, we heard his agenda. he said that he's on a mission to proclaim good news to the spiritually needy. What is that good news? The year of the Lord's favor.

You turn back to God through Jesus, the debt is wiped clean. You're free to go. That debt of our sin that is too great for any of us to bear, Jesus stands ready to cancel it if we'll turn back to him.

Evidently, this woman has heard that message so that her behavior is in very stark contrast to the host, Simon. Now we learn what he really thinks of Jesus because we find that he has withheld the customary greetings for a guest.

[19:20] When Jesus arrived in that culture for dinner, what the host should do is greet the guest with a kiss. Offer him water to wash his dusty feet.

Put oil on his head to freshen up after a day in the hot Middle East. And that helps us understand why the woman did what she did. Look at the contrast in verse 44.

Then Jesus turned toward the woman and said to Simon, do you see this woman? Well, of course Simon has seen her. But look what Jesus wants him to see.

I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman from the time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet.

You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven as her great love has shown.

[20:25] But whoever has been forgiven little loves little. crucially, he does not mean because she has done these things for me, I will forgive her what she has done wrong.

The parable shows us it must be the other way around. Do you see that? He's saying, Simon, do you see how she has treated me this evening? That is because she loves me.

And that love is the fruit of trusting my message that her debt before God, however great, has been completely forgiven. And so it is today that the main sign that you've put your faith in Jesus is that you love him.

Maybe you're here today and you're aware that your love for Jesus has grown cold, that you've drifted from him, that you don't really feel motivated to live serving him.

Or maybe you're someone who's here today and you are very busy serving him, but you realize when you think about it that you have drifted from love for Jesus.

[21:35] Well, Luke chapter 7 invites us, if we feel like that, to rekindle our love for Jesus by going back to verse 42. Reconsider the crippling debt we should owe to God for how we have lived.

But then turn your thoughts to Jesus who knew all of that about you and he set his love on you, a love deep enough to do everything he had to do to make sure that that debt sheet was cancelled.

So why did the woman cry? I think she will have cried because she knew the greatness of her debt. Having experienced the sheer goodness of Jesus, she would look back and grieve her past way of life.

But the tears here are tears of relief. They're tears of joy that the burden has been lifted, the debt has been discharged. In our song shortly we'll sing of how all the wrong we've done has been thrown into a sea without bottom or shore.

Tears of joy. And I think there's another reason that she cries. And it's that that evening she is getting a glimpse of what it's costing Jesus to be a friend of sinners.

[22:53] Her actions remember are compensating for the ways that Simon has treated Jesus with disdain. And that snub from Simon that rejection foreshadows for us what it's ultimately going to cost Jesus to deliver on this offer he's making of forgiveness.

As he courageously associates himself with sinners he is being rejected by self-righteous proud moralists so that they will ultimately reject him and send him to the cross where he has to go so that he can die the death we should have died for our sin abandoned by God to pay the price so that we don't have to we can be forgiven.

And knowing such costly love experiencing that you are loved like that changes you. The story is told of the Archbishop of Paris who was walking past a group of tourists one day in the cathedral admiring a portrait of Jesus dying on the cross and he said do you know there's a story about that picture there was an infamous gang some years ago of street kids here in Paris tough kids and they only let others join in on the gang on pain of doing a right of entry and there was one boy youth for whom they said here's your initiation to join us you've got to run into the cathedral and stand facing that picture and shout out loudly in front of everyone who might be there Jesus Christ who died for me and I do not care and the young man came in and the gang came in with him to watch from a distance to check he did it and he stood before the picture and he shouted Jesus Christ who died for me and he couldn't say the rest and one of the tourists said how do you know the story and the archbishop said it was me it was his own conversion story the love of Jesus at the cross to forgive you transforms you and so our final point today we have a saviour who offers you the assurance of forgiveness in verse 48

Jesus turns to the woman and he says your sins are forgiven he doesn't say that to Simon just as today however good a person you may think you are if you haven't yet come to Jesus for forgiveness then you stand before God with a debt outstanding and there is no way that you can pay off that debt but for the woman whatever she was known for was notorious enough to mean she was publicly known as a woman who led a sinful life it might have been a prominent sexual sin it might have been something else but whatever it was Jesus is reassuring her in earshot of everybody else that she is not defined by that sin she is completely forgiven she is right with God so that if you're here this morning and there's anything in your way of life in what you've done that you might think would disqualify you from being a child of God it does not disqualify you if there's something about you that means you think other people today here who knew that about you would disqualify you from being able to be forgiven you can be sure that Jesus does not disqualify you and in my experience in my own life and in pastoral work with others we often need that reassurance that Jesus gives here to the woman again we hear the offer of forgiveness we sing about it gladly and then we mess up and we hide from God and we feel despondent and we need to hear afresh the reassurance your sins are forgiven now maybe you're here today and this is all very new to you you thought Jesus' message was more like Simon the Pharisee about how you have to work hard to get approval from God and you should fear him if you don't do enough well the question to keep dwelling on is the one that the guests are asking in verse 49 and we're asking all evening after that who is this would you come along on Thursday evening to our church hall for the first evening of Christianity Explored that Robbie mentioned earlier just come along to explore the question who is Jesus Christ but for Hannah and Isaac and Kara and all of us who have put our faith in the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins let's rest today in the reassurance that it will cost Jesus everything to say what he says in verse 50 your faith has saved you go in peace let's pray together heavenly father we have seen remarkable things today about Jesus' character his identity his courage and his mission and we pray the Bible prayer that for each one of us out of your glorious riches you will strengthen us with power and enlarge our hearts to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ that every person here today would experience the reality of that love and would the warmth of Jesus costly life-giving love transform us for our good and for his glory amen we've got prayer