

Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Our Bible reading can be found in the Bible on page 1036, 1036 in the Pew Bibles, or it might be on the screen as well. I'll just give you a moment. Page 1036, 1036.

And we're in Luke chapter 7, verse 36 to 50. Let's read God's holy word.

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, Jesus answered him, Simon, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, he said. Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. 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 one of them will love him more?

[2 : 1 1] 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 pour 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. Then Jesus said to her,

Your sins are forgiven. Your sins are forgiven. The other guests began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Amen. Thanks, Alan, for reading. You can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful to see where we're going as we look at this together. If you could keep your Bibles open at Luke chapter 7, that would be really helpful as we look at that. And let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, your living word, your salvation, your forever King. We ask that as we look at him in your word together. You will open your word to our hearts and open our hearts to your word. For his name's sake.

Amen. Well, this week I was visited by a local budding TV journalist who was doing a story and he wanted to interview me. And so the story was about how there'd been a survey across Scotland that had reported that fewer people in Scotland than previously are defining themselves as religious.

And he wanted to interview a church minister about my reaction to that. Was I concerned about hearing that, that fewer people now say they're religious than previously did in Scotland? I don't know what you would say if you were asked that, if you're here and you're a Christian and someone saw something like that and mentioned it to you at work or at home. You could say, as lots of people are saying, that when you discount nominal religion, just nominal affiliation to religion, there is a lot of evidence that our cities in the UK are becoming a lot more religious. People are becoming much more interested in answers to the big questions of life, longing for something other than the material that we see around us. So you could say something about that. Or you could say, well, it depends what you mean by religion, because actually, although our society is less affiliated with institutional religious organisations, people are profoundly religious. Because religion is just building your life on something, choosing something to make into your God, to worship, to give you what we believe God can give you.

[6 : 01] So you could say that. But there is no doubt that over a generation in Scotland, there has been an incredible decline in the proportion of the population who are affiliated to the mainline Christian denominations.

If you think about the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church, there has been enormous decline in the number of people affiliated to those institutions.

So that's what the survey is getting at. And the change in Scotland is probably as big as anywhere. It's probably bigger than a lot of other countries. So I talked to this guy, Brendan, this TV journalist with his camera on, and I explained that as a Christian, a survey like that really is asking the wrong question. Fundamentally, for a Christian, it's less useful than lots of other questions. Because the key question for me isn't whether or not someone identifies as religious, the key question is, what do you make of Jesus Christ? What do you make of him? You can be a deeply religious person, even a deeply church-going person, and yet really think very little of Jesus, want to have nothing to do with him. When the Apostle Paul went to Athens, a pagan city in Acts chapter 17, he commends them. He says, I see that in many ways, you're very religious people. And then he preaches to them, and he calls them to repent of their religion, and turn to Jesus, and put their trust in him. And if we were in that first generation of Christians, it would have been extremely obvious to us that the religious hierarchy had rejected Jesus. It was the irreligious people, the people who were on the edges of a religious society, the outsiders, who were most drawn to Jesus. And so the key question then, and now, is not, are you religious? It's, what do you make of Jesus Christ? Now, we're continuing our series in Luke's Gospel, as a church family, and in our scene today, we join Jesus at a dinner party, where we find him as the saviour, a religious host, and a scandalous woman. So our first point, as we set the scene, is about the saviour, a powerful saviour, who sets things right. The Jewish people at the time, they were under Roman occupation, so soldiers and centurions, in charge of a hundred soldiers each, would have been around, they would have been a common scene around, and they were a painful reminder for the Jewish people, that they were not free, they were under Roman rule. And they're longing for God to rescue them, to save them, by providing a king that God has promised, who they believe will overthrow that Roman rule.

That's the salvation they long for. But then at the start of Luke 7, in this section we've been looking at as a church, Jesus is confronted by some servants, sent by a centurion, because one of his servants is unwell. So this is the enemy in the eyes of Israel. These people are occupying forces.

But Jesus sees the faith of the centurion, and he heals the servant, because Jesus hasn't come to overthrow the Romans. He's come to bring a new world, where there's no sickness anymore.

[9 : 14] And so he relieves the sickness of this servant, in response to faith. Then he moves on to a town called Nain. Again, we're up in northern Israel, in Galilee. And he sees a funeral procession coming out for a widow's only son. And he says to the woman, don't cry. And he tells the dead young man to get up. And he gets up. Because Jesus hasn't come, well, Jesus hasn't just come to overthrow the Romans. He's come for this new world that he will bring, where there'll be no death anymore.

And then in chapter 8, we'll see that he calms a storm. Because in his new creation, nature will not be an enemy anymore. It will be a friend. And then he drives an evil spirit out of a man. Because in his new creation, there'll be no more evil anymore. So he's this powerful saviour, setting things right. And here in Galilee, people got a breathtaking glimpse of the world God is promising through his promised saviour, Jesus. And remember, Luke is writing while the eyewitnesses of these things are still alive. He says at the beginning of chapter 1 that he's carefully investigated everything. And he's writing an orderly account that we can know with certainty what was fulfilled in Jesus' life and death and resurrection. The eyewitnesses are still alive. The centurion and his household are still alive when Luke is writing. Those people who've been carrying the coffin out of the town in Nain, and they had to go in and cancel the wake and throw a celebration, a birthday party for this boy who'd been brought back to life again. Jesus was giving us a glimpse of that promised future world. So that when we talk about salvation from Jesus, what we mean is that he's come to do what none of us can do. And that's so important today because lots of people today are not interested in Jesus because they think, I don't need Jesus. I don't need him. We think we're sorted without anything he can offer. If we think that Jesus has come to fill a hole in our lives that is missing, then if we don't feel that that hole is there, then we don't think we need him. We'll get by without him. He's for people who have this hole in their lives. If we think he's come because we might need a crutch to lean on when life gets hard, then we'll only feel we need him if we can't cope with life. And while we think we can cope, we're not interested. So that kind of Jesus might not really appeal to you if you're here this morning. But when it comes to the greatest problems of our world, of sickness and death and evil, none of us has the power to put things right. The people of Italy know that this week, don't they? Stunned by the disaster of a bridge that collapsed in Genoa in heavy traffic. The people of India know it, grieving hundreds of people dead in floods. They're longing for a world where nature is not an enemy anymore. The people of

Greece long for that as they're still devastated by families killed in the wildfires. Our world needs a savior. It's obvious our world needs a savior. And wonderfully, here is Jesus demonstrating he has the power to bring the future that our hearts long for. We all need this savior. He's not my Jesus, my boyfriend. He's not my Jesus, my life coach. He's my Jesus, my savior. Come to do what we can't do ourselves with a death crushing, evil defeating, sickness healing, curse lifting, salvation for us all.

So that's our first point, a powerful savior who sets things right. But as well as being global, God's plan for salvation, Jesus offers it to every one of us and he is personally interested in everybody. So now we see him at this dinner party. Our second point, a religious host who grumbles at grace. We could pick up the story in verse 36. If you have a look with me.

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And that's literally how they would have sat down at the table.

[13 : 27] They would have been in a reclining position facing the table with their feet pointed outwards away from the table. And the Pharisees are a devoutly religious group at the time. They are religious people entrenched in tradition and religious life. They're the most morally upstanding members of society. And then there's a bit of a scandal. This notorious woman approaches Jesus.

What is she doing there, this woman? About 10 years ago, I was working in China and I was traveling one weekend in a town I'd never been to before, a kind of traditional Chinese town where there weren't many tourists. And I walked down a street, I was with a couple of friends, and we looked into a courtyard. And we were just looking in because we didn't know if it was public, but it was a private home of obviously a wealthy Chinese family. And the lady, as she saw us, she said to us, have you eaten?

And I said, no. And they said, come in. So we go into this courtyard and this family are sitting down for dinner with their guests at this nice big table. And then there's a little table next to it for the children at the front, just to have their food and sit together. And there's another table for guests.

And they just invited us in. And we went and sat down and we were brought food. And then they tried to talk to us, but they couldn't speak English. So it wasn't very successful because our Chinese, my Chinese was terrible. But we were very grateful and we went on. But it was a great picture of what dinner would have looked like in the culture that Jesus is in. That Simon, as a wealthy and well-known man, perhaps with a courtyard or a big dining room, has invited people for dinner. But because he's a good man, because he's charitable, if you live in the town and you haven't got much money, you can wander in off the street and you can wait and you'll be served leftover food. So there are people who are not invited around the edges of the room while the important guests have their dinner together.

That's what's going on. That's the picture. And verse 37, the woman 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. A sinful life. So her pattern of life was known to be against the ways of God. It was known in the town. It may well have been that she was a prostitute. That would be how a woman might be known as having a sinful life. We don't know, but we can probably infer that.

[16:04] So perhaps she didn't quite plan things how they go. She brings this jar, so she consciously got some kind of plan. But clearly she's already heard Jesus preaching. She's already seen his work. She's put her hope in this man Jesus. And remember their feet are pointed away from the table. And she comes near Jesus and she starts to cry. And her tears fall on his feet. And then she does something culturally shocking. She lets down her hair. That's a very intimate thing to do in a culture where women keep their hair under a scarf all the time. And she uses her hair to wipe his feet.

And then she kisses his feet. And then she has this alabaster jar. Now alabaster jars, you can smell the perfume from them, but to get perfume out you have to break the jar. There's no top that you can put back on. So once she breaks this jar, probably the most expensive thing she owns is poured away. It's gone forever. It's an extraordinary scene. And Simon is scandalized by it. So 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. What's going on? Here is a glimpse inside the mind of a religious person, a moralistic religious person. He's deeply charitable. If we were to translate it into modern terms, it's too easy to write off the Pharisees as mean when you read the Gospels.

This is the guy who pays for the town's night shelter for the homeless. He doesn't drink. He doesn't smoke. He doesn't speed in his car. He's a conservationist. He's a campaigner for action on climate change. And last week he did an Ironman to raise sponsorship for children in need.

It's that kind of guy. But tragically, his good works have become his downfall. Because fundamentally, he thinks you can divide the world into good people and bad people.

And Simon thinks something like this. I just cannot wait for God to come and bring the salvation he's promised. Because he'll vindicate people like me, the good people. That's who he's coming to save, the devoutly religious people. And he'll take away the bad people. And because that's so ingrained in him, he looks down on this woman. And so because he looks down on her, he looks down on Jesus for welcoming her. He can't be a prophet. Otherwise, he'd know what she's like. And if he knew what she's like, and he was really from God, he'd stay well away from her. So then we get Jesus' response. And he tells a parable. It's about a moneylender and two people in debt to this moneylender. One owes him about five grand. And the other one owes him 50 grand. But the moneylender knows that in both cases, they can't afford to pay him back. And he's a very kind man. So he decides to write off the debts of both people. He says to them, forget about the money you owe me. It's my gift to you. You don't have to pay me back. And Jesus asks Simon, which of those men will love the moneylender more?

[19 : 22] It's a very simple story. But in one question, Jesus has left Simon completely exposed. This is what's going on in your heart, Simon. Simon doesn't think Jesus is a prophet.

Jesus knows what's going on in Simon's head all the time. Simon doesn't think much of Jesus because he doesn't think he is in debt to God. Everyone knows him as a good person. And if you think sin is doing bad things, and you've got your list of bad things, and you avoid those things on your list, you don't think you're a sinner. Sinners are other people and not you. Isn't that how lots of people think today? Isn't that why people think, if there is a God, I've got nothing to worry about?

But sin is not doing bad stuff. That's the key thing. Sin is not doing bad stuff. God is good. He made us out of love to know him and live in relationship with him as our heavenly father.

And sin is building your life on something else instead of on that relationship with God. God is letting anything else except for God shape your decisions, set the direction of your life, and reign in your heart. And that thing that you build your life on instead of God could be a really good thing. It could make you very respectable. I was back visiting the village I grew up in where my parents live in the summer. And all around the village are nice detached houses lived in by professional people with nice gardens and very nice cars, because lots of them have children who've now left home. They've got very nice cars, driven by people who raised nice children, who went off to good universities and now have nice careers. It's the great British dream in the village. And the nice respectable people living that dream have forgotten God, by and large. They do not thank God for what he has given them. They're good people. We respect them. We would think of them as good people.

You can build your life on your career and be spoken of well by everyone around you. You can build it on family. It is a respectable sin to put your family before God. But it's a sin.

[21 : 31] You can build your life on a great cause, like helping refugees or saving our oceans from plastic. But if you make any of those good things your God, you'll look like a good person and you'll be sinning. Because if God is real and he made our universe, he gave us all the good things and he has the right to be lived for. And what he wants from us isn't for us just to do the good stuff. It's that we build our lives on him. To do the good things because we're in relationship with him and he wants us to do them. So what does Simon here show us? He shows us that moral respectability can inoculate you from realizing you need Jesus to save you. It can leave you scandalized by Jesus because Jesus offers grace to everyone because he knows everybody needs it. And here we get to the heart of the scene because this is the reason that Jesus has come. One day he will come and put the whole world right.

But first he's come to offer everybody the chance to receive forgiveness for their sin. And the sinful woman knows that. That's our third point. So we've seen a powerful savior who sets things right, a religious horse who grumbles at grace. Thirdly, we see a sinful woman whose life is transformed. Jesus tells the parable to Simon and then he reveals that Simon hasn't offered him the basic courtesies in that culture that you would offer to a guest. Verse 44. Have a look with me. Verse 44. Then he turned towards the woman and said, 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. Then Jesus said to her, your sins are forgiven. It's not that her acts of devotion to Jesus have earned her forgiveness. Rather, it's that the love she shows him at that evening demonstrates, it's proof that she has already realized he will forgive her sin.

She understands the message. So why is she crying? They're tears of love. That's very clear from Jesus. Tears of love. I think for three reasons. First, because she knows her need for forgiveness.

She knows her need for forgiveness. Just like the man in Jesus' story who owes the money lender 50 grand, she's overwhelmed with how great a debt she owed. She embodies a right response to Jesus as she turns from her former way of life and weeps in sorrow for her sin, for the way she's lived.

[24 : 33] Just as today, if we're really going to value Jesus, we need to feel the weight of our sin. We need the Spirit of God to expose for us how much our sin has offended the good God, spurning him, spurning his ways, because we love other things too much.

We've turned good things into God things and we've not loved God as we should. And even our best efforts to serve him are still tainted with selfishness and pride. God is like a faithful husband to us and we are like a wife who's prostituted ourselves out to other gods.

That's one of the pictures the Bible uses for our sin. And the more we know our need for forgiveness, the more Jesus will mean to us. That's what she knows, her need for forgiveness.

Secondly, she's crying because she sees the cost of her forgiveness. I think most likely she has seen what Jesus describes to Simon. That here is Jesus, her amazing Savior.

And Simon the Pharisee is publicly disrespecting him. Jesus came in from the dusty streets. He should have been offered some water for his feet. But Simon didn't offer that to him.

[25 : 45] So she washed them with her tears. And guests should have been kissed as they came in. But Simon didn't greet Jesus with a kiss. So she kisses him. And guests should have been offered oil for their head.

And Simon didn't offer it. So she poured perfume on his feet. What is she seeing that's so painful? It's that for Jesus to fulfill his mission and offer salvation to the marginalized, to the poor, to women, to the scandalized, for him to do that, he has to be despised and rejected.

And ultimately, the disrespect that Simon shows to Jesus here is a foretaste of his rejection in Jerusalem by the Pharisees. That will lead him to the cross.

The woman is getting a glimpse of what it costs Jesus to forgive people like her and me and you. Just as today, as well as feeling our need of forgiveness, feeling the weight of our sin, to appreciate Jesus, we need to reflect on what it cost him to save us.

That for us to be forgiven, he was despised and rejected, mocked and stripped. He was whipped and he stumbled, exhausted, carrying a wooden beam to Calvary, where they drove nails through his flesh and hung him to die.

[27 : 07] Because they hated him as he offered forgiveness to all. She sees the cost of forgiveness. But lastly, she weeps because she feels the joy of forgiveness.

Ultimately, she knows what that debtor knew. In the story Jesus told us, the debts are wiped clean, that her debt has been completely cleared with God. She knows how it feels to look back on everything you've ever done wrong and know that it's all forgotten by God.

There's a modern worship song where they say, our sins have been thrown into an ocean without bottom and without shore. That's the picture that she knows of her sin. As she looks back, with contrition and remorse, she knows God has forgotten all of it.

There was a guy who came to see me last year, crippled with guilt about something he had done. He was trusting Jesus, but he was convinced that God must be as angry with him as he was with himself about what he had done.

And I got a pen and paper and I asked him to write down, will God punish the same sins twice? He was looking at his sin, but he needed to look at the cross as well and see that God had paid for the sin on the cross.

[28 : 22] The sinful woman has felt that release and it brings her this great joy. These are tears of joy and relief. It is a wonderful feeling to be forgiven by God. And if you're here today and you've never experienced that joy, then you could ask Jesus to forgive you for all of your sins today.

Today would be a great day to do that. Why not speak to me about that? But for those of us who have done that, let's be encouraged today as we see the woman's response to her forgiveness.

Now, I used to work as a lawyer on Fleet Street in London and every day I got off the tube at St. Paul's and I came out of the station and I walked past St. Paul's Cathedral on the way to work and I walked past it on the way home.

And the first couple of weeks, I used to look at it and think, this is amazing. What an amazing building. And after that, I never even saw it. Day by day. Sometimes I would notice it because I was annoyed with the tourists in my way of looking at it while I was trying to get to work on time.

But it was so familiar to me, I never saw it anymore. Could we be a bit like that with the truth that our sins are forgiven? The first day we grasp it, it changes your life because joy and peace floods into you.

[29 : 37] But day by day, this week, we'll just take it for granted and we don't even see it as we worry about all the things everyone else worries about. So let me ask, could you let this woman's experience drive you to ask God to help you feel more sharply your need for forgiveness, to see again in Jesus the cost of your forgiveness and to feel more deeply the joy of your forgiveness?

Verse 49, The other guests began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you.

Go in peace. Think again about that dinner. We see a powerful saviour starting to set things right and we all need his salvation.

We see a religious host grumbling at grace because he's missed that sin is not just bad things you do. And then a sinful woman has faith and she weeps in love at Jesus' feet.

Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven. What do you make of Jesus Christ? That's the only question. Let's have a moment of quiet to reflect on the scene and then Darren will come up and lead us in a prayer.

[31 : 03] Amen.