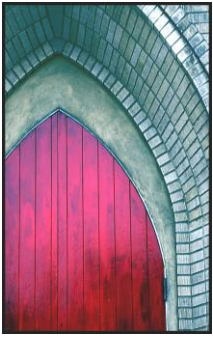


# Greater Forgiveness

*A Sacred Meal, pt. 1*

SCRIPTURE TEXT: LUKE 7.36-50



## *Know Thyself . . .*

Last Sunday we began considering the tension that exists in the midst of our two greatest tasks as human beings: knowing God and knowing ourselves. The tension exists because we find only as we honestly examine ourselves and the world around us that we are compelled to honestly see God for who He is. Yet at the same time, we can't truly know

ourselves and our condition until we have "looked upon God's face" in order to see ourselves in His perfect light.

The challenge we face is that this means that we need 'outside help' in understanding who we are, and in knowing God. Neither comes to us 'naturally' or even by regular meditation or introspection. And so, we turn to Holy Scripture, as we do every week, because we believe that in these words God has spoken into our lives, in order that we might pursue both of these endeavors.

In particular, last Sunday and today, we turn our attention to Luke 7 in order to know ourselves and our Saviour more fully. At the end of the chapter, Luke recounts to us a scene in which Jesus has been invited to join a meal in the home of a devout follower of God's law and the traditions built up surrounding that law. This meal—most likely intended to be a serious time of theological discussion—was rudely interrupted by a woman of 'questionable morals' from the city. The only person in the room who understood what was happening was Jesus; the host was particularly disturbed. And so Jesus spoke, and for some present, He raised more questions than He answered.

The call for us in these verses is to ask where we see ourselves in that room—and in particular to ask where is the sin in ourselves reflected in the lives of Simon, the Pharisee, and this anonymous woman from the city. Reflected in the lives of these two individuals, we saw that sin involves a complex interplay of disobedience to the will of God, a twisting of what He has called good into an unrecognizable distortion, and a striving for distance from God. Sin is our fighting stance towards God—it is our ceaseless efforts to live our lives apart from humble dependence upon and submission to God Himself. This morning, even as we still ask "where do you see yourself in these verses?" we need to ask the more important question, do you see a Saviour here, and what do you see of Him?

## *Luke 7.36-50*

<sup>36</sup>One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup>And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup>and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

<sup>39</sup>Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

<sup>40</sup>And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

<sup>41</sup>"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup>When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup>Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

<sup>44</sup>Then 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. <sup>45</sup>You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. <sup>46</sup>You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. **47** Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." <sup>48</sup>And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup>Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup>And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

## *God and Santa Claus*

Writer Annie Dillard tells a story about one Christmas Eve when she was a little girl. The whole family had gone out for dinner, and as little Annie was warming up from the cold December air, she saw the front door blow open and Santa Claus (a neighbor dressed up) standing there. While her parents were all excited for Annie and her little sister, Annie did what any conscientious little girl would have done: she took off running up to her room. She writes in explanation: "Like everyone in his right mind, I feared Santa Claus, thinking he was God . . . I knew right from wrong, but had barely tested the possibility of shaping my own behavior, and then only from fear, and not yet from love. Santa Clause was an old man whom you never saw, but who nevertheless saw you; he knew when you'd been bad or good. He knew when you'd been bad or good! And I had been bad." During a second episode with this neighbor—an older woman named Miss White—in which she was showing Annie how a magnifying glass works and Annie burned her hand, Annie ran away again. Reflecting on both events in view of her faith, Annie confesses "I am still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. For you meant only love, and love, and I felt only fear, and pain."

Is this how you see God? When the man who we are told keeps a list of everything we've done and will reward us accordingly shows up at the front door, it's not always a comforting thought. We know what it is to want to run even at times from One who knows us better than we know ourselves. It puts us in a place of weakness, in a place where we are no longer in control of judgments measured against us, of the direction of our lives. And so, we find ourselves in a stance against God Himself—with our fists clinched in rage at

One who would dare question our autonomy, or doing our best to run from Him as fast as we can.

Layered in this stance (sin) is our disobedience to God's Word, the twisting of what is good into something distorted and therefore somehow less than good, and ultimately a great distance from God Himself. But as we gaze into the Truth of Scripture once more, we find that this is not the final declaration made against those who are God's. Looking at these verses again, we must see far more than our sin—we desperately need to gaze upon our Savior as the only One who can and has dealt with the atrocity of our sin. More specifically, as we consider the complexity of sin in our lives, we need to see that not only does God stand against that sin, but in Jesus He deals with every layer of that sin.

## Distance and Proximity

One of the ways that Jesus deals with the complexity of our sin is that He counters our attempts at distance from Him with proximity toward us. This runs throughout these verses. Notice what Jesus does. He accepts an invitation to dinner by a man who at best is a skeptic.<sup>7.36</sup> He allows a woman no one wants anything to do with to touch him.<sup>7.38</sup> Knowing the cynicism of His host, Jesus doesn't dismiss the man, but engages him.<sup>7.40</sup> Taking that a step further, He tells a brief story—He paints a picture—as a way of bringing understanding.<sup>7.41-42</sup> For both Simon, trying to keep God at a safe distance in his rule following and for this woman who's reputation alone keeps her at a distance from God and others, Jesus proclaims "I am here." This is one of the recurring themes of Luke's account of Jesus' life—and of the whole Bible. Luke reminds us of Simeon's words, when Jesus was presented at the temple as a baby: "a light for revelation of the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."<sup>Lk 2.32</sup> Jesus Himself, after meeting a short tax-man named Zacchaeus, said that ". . . the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."<sup>Lk 19.10</sup> In Jesus, God spans the distance between us and Him.

If you are a believer in Jesus, know that this is part of who you are: your faith has been born out of God's pursuit of you. In times of doubt, know that your faith doesn't entirely rest on your ability to stay confident. Even as you struggle with specific sins in your life, know that your ability to do what's right is not the foundation of your standing before God. If you are not yet a believer and you stand firmly against God, know that Jesus' proximity to you in His word and in His people may ultimately stand as judgment against you. He has come near to display who He is to you; there is no way to counter His Truth.

## Twisting and Truth

The second layer of sin with which Jesus faces here is our propensity to take what is good and to twist it to serve ourselves. In these verses, twisting comes in the form of the distortion of God's law by Simon to serve his own ends of self-righteousness, and the twisting of the marriage relationship by the woman for reasons not articulated here. Jesus' response to both comes primarily through His response to this woman. Responding to her acts of humility, submission, and service,<sup>7.38</sup> Jesus places Himself as the only rightful object of worship for both individuals—the only right response to distortions would often make. This woman is pre-occupied with one thing: gratitude toward her savior. She isn't concerned about any one

else in the room; she isn't concerned about what is 'acceptable' for a woman in her position. She brings what she has—a tool from her trade (the alabaster flask)—and submits every part of who she is to Jesus. Where God's law was for Simon a means to separate him from everyone else, Jesus by his response declares that He is the focus of the law. Worship in grace and truth is the rightful response to our twisting of the good; and Jesus leads us in the worship of Himself.

This is important for us as God's people to keep before us. Jesus deals with our distortions of what is good NOT by calling us to cast aside those things, but by calling us to worship Him. Paul's line of reasoning in Romans 1.18-32 follows similarly: the problem from of sin in this world stems in part from our worship of anything and everything that is not God. Whether it is sex, money, work, stability, a house, children, or even God's law—we miss the good of Creation by casting those things aside when they are distorted. Healing comes for us as Jesus leads us in worship.

## Disobedience and Forgiveness

The third layer of sin with which Jesus deals in these verses is that of our disobedience, which He faces with forgiveness. Jesus says to this woman "Your sins are forgiven"<sup>7.48</sup> which we understand to be a restatement of what she already has heard. Jesus' explanation of what she is doing<sup>7.47</sup> is that her worship and service toward Him is an outward expression of a forgiveness that she has received prior to this occasion. When he declares to Simon "her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much,"<sup>7.47</sup> He is NOT saying that she has earned that forgiveness by these acts. Rather, that she loves much because she has been forgiven much. Her worship of Jesus comes as a result of having been forgiven of her sins. She has not cleaned herself up. She has earned nothing. Jesus spoke forgiveness to her; and she has believed His word.<sup>7.50</sup>

The nature of our disobedience is not reducible to a simple act of sin or even a collection of such acts, but instead points to our rejection of God's word in our lives. Thus our need is far greater than simply making amends for what we've done wrong. It extends, therefore, far beyond making sure we live a 'good' life. We need Jesus to speak these same words of authority into our lives—because there is nothing within us that can grant the forgiveness we need. Believing in Jesus and receiving forgiveness is an ultimate act of worshipping the True God.

## Peace

The call of these verses is that we need to see our sin more clearly—that we must honestly face our rejection of God's word in our lives, the way we distort that which He calls good, and the distance we seek from Him. But even so, in Jesus' final words to this woman: "go in peace,"<sup>7.50</sup> we must find rest. We must resist and fight against the temptation of self-condemnation, even as we see our sin more clearly. Living in despair over our sin can be yet another form of living apart from dependence upon God—it is our striving to remain in control. This is for us individually, but also for our church. In our sin, we must see the Savior more clearly—to know that in our distance He has come near, as we twist the good, He calls us to Truth, and in our disobedience, He offers to us forgiveness. By the word of God, know yourself and see your sin; by His grace, gaze upward to His beauty and find freedom.