

Understanding Jesus

The Surprising Truth about Love

Luke 7:36-8:3

Whatever your age and stage of life, one of the most strategic things you can do if you want a satisfying, meaningful life is to learn how to love other people well. Generally speaking, if you know how to love others well, you can thrive in your home, in your workplace, in the church, and in relationships in general. There are many other factors at play, but without the capacity to love, you will have a very difficult, frustrating life.

If you're older (like me), you already know this. Students, you need to know that "it's possible to make all A's and flunk out of life." One of the determining factors is whether or not you love others well in every area of your life.

If you love people you want the very best for them, and you show it in the way you treat them. Love is patient, love is kind love does not hold grudges. . . love believes the best. . .

Some of us here today could tell stories about how we've hurt other people because we didn't love well - in our homes, in the church, in the workplace, in friendships in general. We could also tell about the blessing we've brought to other people in each of those contexts by loving well.

Again, whatever your age and stage of life, one of the most strategic things you can do if you want a satisfying life is to learn how to love other people well.

Today's passage, Luke 7:36-8:3, is incredibly valuable in this respect. In this passage Jesus tells us ***the surprising truth about love*** - the perspective that will fuel our love for God and for other people like nothing else. This is the fourth message in our sermon series from Luke 7 and 8, "Understanding Jesus." Let's dive in.

36 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table.

Luke has already described the Pharisees' growing hostility toward Jesus (see 5:30, 6:7, etc.). And so we're immediately suspicious of this Pharisee's motives. He wasn't inviting Jesus over for a meal because he was teachable. No, he probably wanted to entrap Jesus in some way.

But Jesus accepted the invitation. Jesus would go to anyone's house; it didn't matter if the invitation came from outcasts like tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:20-32), from powerful and wealthy people like the centurion (7:1-10), or from religiously respected people like this Pharisee. Jesus will come to ***your*** house if you invite him in (Revelation 3:20). Jesus would love to have dinner with you.

37 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, 38 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.

Luke himself describes her as a “sinner.” And we all know what that means, right? No, we don’t know what that means because we aren’t told. Whatever the case, she had a “past” and a reputation: both Luke and the Pharisee call her a sinner, and even Jesus says that “her sins are many.” And her actions suggest that she did not hide from her sinful past.

Apparently she had encountered Jesus sometime in the past; perhaps she had heard him teach or seen him heal someone or even spoken with him. But when she heard that Jesus was at the Pharisee’s house, she was compelled to express her love for him. Historians tell us that when a wealthy person hosted a large meal or banquet, the poor in the community would stop by to “receive some of the leftovers” (Liefeld, p. 903). Therefore it wasn’t necessarily an intrusion for this woman to show up.

But what she did probably made EVERYONE very uncomfortable - except Jesus. Jesus was “reclining at table,” meaning he was laying down on a mat (perhaps propped up with his left arm, eating with his right hand) with his feet away from the table. Instead of keeping her distance, this woman came near and immediately was overcome with emotion; she began weeping. She fell down at his feet and wept on them. She began wiping Jesus’ feet - not with a towel, but with her hair. She kissed his feet. She broke open a flask/bottle made of alabaster and poured ointment on Jesus feet. **Who does that?** (Jesus will answer that question later in the passage.)

Notice as well that **Jesus did not stop her**. And that’s what bothered the Pharisee the most. [Aside from this passage the only other time Luke mentions “ointment” is in 23:56 where the women prepared ointment they planned on using to prepare Jesus’ body for burial.]

Notice the Pharisee’s response to Jesus in verse 39.

39 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.”

The Pharisee would have admitted that he had sinned (the whole sacrificial system in the old covenant presupposed as much). But it’s clear that he considered this woman to be a different category of sinner than himself. To him, she was the type of sinner that **God himself** shunned. Since prophets represented God, if Jesus were a prophet he too would have shunned this person.

The Pharisee really believed that God was **against** sinners (like the woman at Jesus’ feet) and **for** righteous people (like him). Throughout Luke Pharisees are depicted as being self-righteous; in other words, they believed that they were right with God because of how they **themselves** lived.

In chapter 18 Jesus tells a parable to people who viewed themselves as righteous and who viewed others with contempt. He tells about a Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. His prayer consisted of thanking God that he wasn't like sinners like the tax collector standing nearby beating his breast over his own sinfulness. The self-righteous Pharisee was proud and the sinful tax collector was humble. We see that pattern repeated here in Luke 7 with the proud, self-righteous Pharisee and the humble, repentant woman.

In the following verses Jesus masterfully explains what was really going on when the woman wept at his feet. In his explanation he reveals the surprising truth about love. Notice how Jesus knew the Pharisee's inner thoughts in verse 40.

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

Jesus tells a short parable (which is a story with a "point").

41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

A denarius was what a laborer would make in a day. So 500 denarii would have been about a year and a half worth of wages; 50 denarii would have been about two months of wages.

42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Jesus is "setting the hook" with this question. . .

43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

The larger the debt that's cancelled, the more appreciation, affection, and love you'd show to the person who cancelled it, right? If somebody paid off your home mortgage, you'd show them more love than the person who paid for your meal at a restaurant.

Based on that shared conclusion, Jesus now explains to the Pharisee how to interpret what the "sinful woman" had done and therefore why he didn't stop her from doing what she did. Jesus makes a series of contrasts between the woman and the Pharisee.

44 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. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

“Do you see this woman?” No, the Pharisee hadn’t really “seen” this woman; he hadn’t seen her humility, her repentance, or her love. Whereas the Pharisee didn’t show Jesus the common courtesies of that day, the woman showed him extravagant love. The conclusion:

47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” 48 And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus didn’t try to minimize her sinfulness in any way; he agrees with Luke and the Pharisee that “her sins. . . are many.” She was the one who owed a year and a half of income in Jesus’ parable. Her sin had created a crushing debt that she couldn’t pay. But because her many sins were **forgiven**, she loved extravagantly.

By contrast, the Pharisee had been “forgiven little.” That’s not because his sins were few; they were different than the woman’s, but they were still many. If you could ask his wife and kids (if he had them), they would probably give you an ear full. Self-righteous people tend to be harsh, judgmental, unkind, and demanding. Whatever his sins, he didn’t consider them a very big deal. Jesus’ point is because he believed he needed to be forgiven little, he was forgiven little, and he loved little.

The Surprising Truth about Love: *love is proportional to forgiveness.* Those who are forgiven much love much; those who are forgiven little love little. *If you want to love well, you need to have your many sins forgiven and you must never forget it.*

It’s not the case that you have to be a Christian to love other people. I know many compassionate, caring people who are not followers of Christ. And that is a great benefit for this world. Since every human being is created in the image of God, we all have an instinctive desire to do good for other people. (See Jesus’ comments in Matthew 5:46-47.)

But there is a distinctive type of love that only Christians can show. And it begins with a **love for God**. Remember in Jesus’ parable, the one who was forgiven the large sum of money loved the moneylender who canceled that debt. Christians love God because he is the one who has cancelled their debt. The repentant woman loved Jesus (God in the flesh) so extravagantly because he had canceled her debt. The love of Christians is distinct because it comes from a deep, deep gratitude over the fact that God has canceled a crushing debt that I could never repay. [John wrote in 1 John 4:19, “We love because God first loved us.”]

When Jesus pronounced “Your sins are forgiven,” those present couldn’t help but wonder about Jesus’ identity:

49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?”

This is the question that each of us needs to answer: Who is Jesus? Is he merely a good moral teacher on par with a dozen others? Or is he the unique Son of God who paid the debt that my sin deserved? Is he the one who can forgive *my* sins?

In verse 50 we get the last piece of the puzzle in this woman's story:

50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

It turns out that her faith - her confidence in Jesus - is what had saved her (brought about her forgiveness). Her extravagant love isn't what saved her; her love was the byproduct of her salvation.

We see the same thing in Luke 8:1-3. There Luke gives examples of other women who also loved much because they'd been forgiven much: Mary Magdalene "from whom seven demons had gone out" and others who provided for Jesus and his disciples "out of their own means" (i.e, they used their own money to fund their travels). The point is that the repentant woman in chapter 7 wasn't the exception. When people are forgiven much, something so miraculous happens that they love much.

When we put it all together, **this is how I would describe the repentant woman's experience**: she came to understand that her sins had created a debt she could never repay; she turned from her sin in repentance and turned to Jesus in faith; Jesus forgave her sin; because her many sins were forgiven, she loved much. Her love was proportional to what she had been forgiven.

My question is do you think about yourself the way the Pharisee did or the way the repentant woman did? ***If you think of yourself like the Pharisee did***, you tend to compare yourself to others; your honest, unbiased, objective evaluation is that you are superior to almost everybody you know. You feel very justified in viewing other people (or whole groups of people) with contempt. You may or may not call yourself a follower of Christ, but what he has done for you on the cross is really an afterthought.

If you think of yourself like the repentant woman did, you live your life very conscious of the fact that because of your faith in Jesus, God has cancelled the crushing debt of sin that you could never repay. As a result, you love the Lord your God with everything you've got. Like Paul (1 Timothy 1) you've never gotten over the fact that "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." And you also love other people well - in your home, in the church, in your workplace, and in friendships in general.

Let me give you an example of how this might look. Tim Keller tells the story of a young woman who began attending the church he pastored in NYC. She would come in a little late and leave a little early. But one day Keller met her after church and introduced himself. She said, "I come in and out sometimes. I'm not sure I believe what you do, but I'm intrigued." Keller asked her how she found out about Redeemer (where he's a pastor). She told him her story.

She worked for a TV network in NYC. When she had worked there for only a short period of time she made “a really bad mistake” - a career ending kind of mistake. She fully expected to be fired, but her boss (who was well respected and who had a lot of credibility with everyone else) went in and took the blame for what had happened. He said, “I didn’t train her well. . . I didn’t prep her well to do her job. If you have to be mad at somebody be mad at me, but don’t fire her.” When he did this he lost credibility and social capital. This woman was able to keep her job, so she went in to thank him. He kept saying, “Don’t worry about it. . .” But she kept asking him why he would do what he did. She said, “I’ve had bosses in the past who’ve taken credit for **good** things I’ve done; but I’ve never had a boss take the **blame** for something I’ve done. . . I’ve never seen that before. . .” Finally he said, “You’ve forced me to say this, and I’m only going to say it once: I’m a Christian. And **my whole life is based on the man who took the blame for me**. And that tends to shape everything I do.” She said, “Where do you go to church?”

If you want to love like that man, you need to have your many sins forgiven and you must never forget it.

The Lord’s Table is one of those practices that reminds us that Jesus paid for us a debt that we could never pay. The bread symbolizes the body of Christ that was broken for us, the cup the blood of Christ shed for us. The brutality of the cross (humiliating and excruciating) reflects the sinfulness of our sin (the weight of the debt we owed).