

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL ABSOLUTION (Luke 7:36-50)

4.11.21

INTRODUCTION

I hope you all had a wonderful Easter weekend. Like Christmas, Jesus is the reason for the season. And also, like Christmas, Easter should be one of those gifts from God that we carry as a filter through every day of our lives. Both of those incredible moments of God so directly intervening in the affairs of this world should be moments that we keep at the ready, always available at a moment's notice to share with somebody who needs to hear the miraculous stories.

But now it is back to the “Radical Rabbi.” So, as we return, it might be useful to remind ourselves of why we refer to Christ in that way. Now it could be because he was never afraid to be seen having fellowship with anybody. That was pretty radical, so much so that his enemies even called him out for it. It could also be because of the miracles he performed — those amazing displays that left people speechless. Every one of those displays were completely radical in that nobody at that time had ever seen anything like it.

But for our purposes, the biggest reason I have seen Jesus as a “radical rabbi” is because of the contrast between how Jesus presented God and how the Jewish leadership — the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees — presented God. While the Jewish leadership presented God in terms of rules to be obeyed, Jesus presented God in terms of a life to be lived. While the Jewish leadership presented God in terms of regulations, Jesus presented God in terms of relationship. And, as we will see in our story this morning, while the Jewish leadership saw sin in everybody but themselves, Jesus simply saw sin in everybody. But unlike the leadership, who only knew rebuke and reprimand, Jesus provided remedy and restoration — quite the radical difference. So, as we begin this story, **let's start it off with a moment of prayer.**

TEXT & ANALYSIS (Luke 7:36-50)

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table — Luke 7:36.

Right from the start, this is interesting. In general, the Pharisees had been increasing their public opposition and hostility to Jesus. But there had also been those who had made some level of connection with Christ: Nicodemus had had his famous late-night, after-dark, one-on-one meeting with Jesus, confessing at that time: **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him” — Nicodemus, John 3:2.** And we know from the crucifixion narratives of Mark and Luke that a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, the one who went to Pilate and asked permission to take charge of Christ's body, was a member of the Council (the Sanhedrin). What's more, Luke tells us that he had not consented to the decision to have Christ crucified, and John tells us that he was, in fact, a disciple of Jesus, but secretly out of his fears of what the Jewish leadership might do to him if they found out. Along with Nicodemus, in an arguably risky public display of loyalty and love, they had hastily

prepared the body for burial, using spices apparently purchased by Nicodemus, and then had buried Jesus in a tomb owned by Joseph.

Now, while Simon may not have been to that level of connection, he nevertheless invited Jesus into his home for a fellowship meal — a very public way of showing connection with one's guest; in other words, this was not something you'd do for an enemy. Now, to be clear, the Bible gives us no indication as to what motivated Simon to extend this invitation. It may well have been that, regardless of the outspoken opposition of others, Simon simply found himself curious about this itinerant rabbi from the backwaters of Galilee who had been causing such a stir literally everywhere he went. So, instead of just blindly going along with everybody else in his position, something had sufficiently moved him to want to learn more about this remarkable man before deciding in his own heart what might need to be done with him.

Anyway, Jesus is now in Simon's home, preparing to eat whatever Simon had had prepared when, all of a sudden, from out of nowhere, a startling event occurred: ***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 — Luke 7:37.***

Luke gives us a whole bunch of information in that one sentence:

- 1) The woman was a local, someone who lived in the same town as Simon.
- 2) She had a reputation as a sinful woman but wondering about what her sins were is simply useless, and unnecessary conjecture; in fact, that's all the Greek tells us as well: She ***was a sinner.***
- 3) The public nature of Simon's hosting Jesus allowed the woman to learn that Jesus was there in her town. Jesus was virtually always followed by a crowd, so that plus the constant word-of-mouth testimony of Christ would have likely made hearing that Jesus was there not exactly a state secret. Also, it was not unusual in the least to have the uninvited hanging out around a banquet; much like today, there was a draw to "famous" people. There would have also been physical openness and access into the banquet area itself, particularly if the banquet itself was located in a courtyard setting, so being able to gain entrance would not have been a difficult feat — which worked out well for her. As a woman, she never would have been invited to such an event and, beyond that, any self-respecting rabbi would have never either spoken with a woman in public or publicly dined with her. Under normal circumstances, she would have never been allowed there.
- 4) She came to Simon's house with a rather unique gift.

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 — Luke 7:38.

We have no idea how she had made the connection, but it is obvious that a line had been drawn from the state of her life to the "all things new" life that Jesus offered. Just prior to this moment, Jesus had famously called out to the crowds gathered around him: ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" — Jesus Christ,***

Matthew 11:28. It certainly is possible that her life, worn out by the way she had lived, found hope and a real reason for living for the first time ever in hearing those beautiful words. But whatever moment began a change from her being just a sinner to a sinner saved by grace, she knew that Jesus — his words of welcome, grace and forgiving relief from the wearying, tiresome burdens of her life — was the reason. And in her repentant heart, she wanted to show some outward sign of her changed life — and her thankful gratitude as well.

So, in her conviction of sin, the tears began, and soon they were spilling onto Christ's feet. She bent over to wipe his feet with her hair and then, her worship overflowing to her Savior, she tenderly began kissing his feet. And then, completing her act of worship, she began to pour the perfume she had brought with her onto his feet.

We don't know if anybody else saw what was happening, or whether they were impressed with this moment of devotion. But we do know one who was decidedly unimpressed: the host of this banquet, Simon. Luke tells us: ***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 woman she is — that she is a sinner" — Luke 7:39.***

Now since this woman was from the same town as Simon, her lifestyle choices appear to have been well-known to him, as he took a very pharasaical stance toward her. Note that instead of any kind of empathy for her spiritual condition, he simply applies a label which will be his ongoing judgment of her: "She is a sinner." Also, as it was customary for married women to keep their heads covered, the fact that her hair is uncovered suggests, to be polite, a very loose morality. Simon is judging based on what he assumes everybody can see. As far as he was concerned, that was the end of a story that in his view was never going to change. And, in fact, the outcome of her story would have never even entered his mind. The only conclusion he draws, according to Luke, had nothing to do with the woman, but with the obviously misplaced opinion that Jesus was a prophet. Instead, Simon was thinking, What kind of prophet is this that he can't even discern this obviously sinful woman? Everyone in town knows of her; why doesn't he?

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said — Luke 7:40.

Jesus is about to prove himself the prophet of which Simon doubted. But look how he does this: "answering" not Simon's words, but Simon's thoughts, responding not to anything Simon said but rather to ideas that Simon would have thought were safely hidden in the privacy of his mind. However, at the same time, Simon shows respect to Jesus by addressing him with the term "teacher" or "rabbi."

"Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. [This would be the equivalent debts of approximately \$80 and \$8 today.] 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 — Luke 7:41-43.

A very simple parable that makes a very strong point — one that Simon needed to hear.

Then he turned toward 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” — Luke 7:44-46.

Jesus is about to do something unthinkable in that particular culture: Hold up a woman as an example to a man. And even more than that, he is going to hold up a “sinner” as an example to a Pharisee — yikes! But Jesus does this by comparing what she has done against the expected social obligations Simon would have incurred as the host for this particular event.

As the host, Simon would have been expected to provide a washbasin so that his guests could wash their feet. Apparently, none had been provided. And as the host, Simon would have been expected to provide oil in case any guests would have wanted to anoint and soothe the skin on the top of their heads. None was available. And it would have been completely common to welcome one’s guests with a kiss of both respect and affection. This had not happened either. But where Simon had failed in his social obligations, this woman had more than made up for.

But there, of course, was something far more important behind her gestures of worship than simply social obligations. She was reflecting the joy of realizing a forgiveness she had never experienced before, and a new life as a result. And her thanksgiving could not be kept inside; she simply had to show it.

Then Jesus continues addressing Simon: ***“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven — as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”*** And then Jesus addresses the woman directly: ***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 woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” — Luke 7:47-50.***

Jesus never denies that this woman led a sinful life, and that much sin had been accumulated during her life. But then he declares that her sins — as many of them as there were — were forgiven. This woman was experiencing what David had written some 1,000 years before: ***For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us — David, Psalm 103:11-12.*** She was experiencing the exhilarating joy that Isaiah had prophesied some 700 years before: ***“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more” — God speaking, Isaiah 43:25.*** That’s why this message is called “A Radical Absolution.” To be granted absolution means that a sinner has been granted complete release from guilt, obligation or punishment. As a result of what she had experienced, the loving worship she was displaying in that moment was an outward response to the truth of that inner forgiveness. At the same time, Simon’s lack of love reflected a life where little had been asked to be forgiven.

And then Jesus gives this anonymous woman the greatest gift of all — the assurance that all her sins were forgiven. Because he stated this publicly there was some reaction; after all, only God could forgive sins, so who was this guy to say such a thing? But they missed the obvious answer: This was God forgiving sins, in the person of his Son.

And then Jesus concludes with a focus on what had saved her: not her tears, not her gift but, rather, her faith — her belief that forgiveness was completely found only in Jesus. She had repented of her sins and put her faith in Christ to be able to *cleanse [her] from all unrighteousness* — *I John 1:9b (NKJV)*. And how complete was the salvation Christ had provided her? By telling her to “go in peace,” Jesus is literally telling her to “go into peace,” meaning she can now enter into the peace of an eternal relationship with God; as Paul said so well: *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand* — *Paul, Romans 5:1-2a*.

APPLICATION

There are three things that really struck me about this story, and they both revolve around the idea of awareness:

First should be our awareness of God. Jeremiah memorably said it this way: *Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness* — *Jeremiah, Lamentations 3:22-23*. Because of God’s compassions (plural) toward us, compassions that are new every morning, our awareness of God and everything about him — his love, his grace, his mercy, his faithfulness, the salvation he has poured on us through the death of his Son on the cross — should continually grow in our awareness, in the sense of every day God being fresh and new in our lives. Remember our verse from a couple of weeks ago: *Keep your eyes open for GOD, watch for his works; be alert for signs of his presence* — *Psalms 105:4 (MSG)*. He should not be our last thought, or a thought arrived at only after everything else has failed. We should live with the primacy of God being our most immediate thought, and it is that awareness of God before all else that should carry us through each and every single day, through each and every single moment. Like this woman, we should not be able to keep it hidden, but should desire to express it openly — regardless of the reactions or responses or opinions of others. It should be the most obvious, proactive truth in our lives that we stand ready to share without hesitation.

So, a great question to ask ourselves is this: If Lamentations 3 is true, what new compassions of God have you seen this morning? How has God shown himself new to you today?

Second should be our reaction to our sins. Consider this woman: There was nothing casual about this at all; in fact, quite the contrary: She was devastated, she was heartbroken. Her response to her own sins had completely broken her down and put her literally into a state of mourning. Now compare this with Simon. This guy was literally blindfolded from the inside. He had no problem pointing at this woman and declaring, “This woman is a

sinner!” Yet he could not find it within himself to find the nearest mirror, take a look and declare, with just as much conviction: “You are a sinner.”

You see, this story is not about an amount of sin; if it had been, one could have made a case that the woman was by far the greater sinner. But no; this story is about an awareness of sin. This woman was aware, and it broke her heart. Simon was unaware, which made him heartless. This woman was overwhelmed by her sin. Simon remained unaware of two things: (1) he was a sinner, and (2) while he might not have ‘fessed up to his sins, God was aware of every one — big, small and everything in between.

So, another great question to ask ourselves is this: How do our sins, our own failures and shortcomings, affect us? Do we mourn our sins? Does it devastate us when we fall short in our Father’s eyes? A great barometer of how growth into the image of Jesus Christ is just that: How much do our sins impact us? This woman is a great picture of what sin should do to us — drive us to tears, and to our knees — reflecting Paul’s agony with his sin: ***I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? — Paul, Romans 7:15, 24*** — which brings up another great question: How often do we pause to try and grasp the magnitude of our salvation, and the amazing grace behind it? How often do we let ourselves be overwhelmed by God’s love, God’s grace, and his sacrifice through his Son?

And third: Simon had no problem judging this woman a sinner, in part because he had no consciousness of his own sin. That’s what judging does: Judging focuses our attention, not inwardly to ourselves, but outwardly to others. Judging makes us trade God’s messages of reconciliation and restoration to others for our declarations of guilt about others. Judging deceives us into thinking that, instead of being a sinner, we are somehow a standard. That’s why Jesus gave us all specific warning when it comes to judging: ***“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:1-2.*** Remember that, if anybody was ever in a completely righteous position to judge, it was Christ. Somebody perfect to hang out with us? And yet, how did he describe his mission? ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” — Jesus Christ, John 3:17.***

You see, judging deceives us into overlooking one of the greatest truths of Scripture: ***[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — Paul, Romans 3:23.*** Judging makes us think we’re better than those around us, particularly if somebody’s failure has hurt us. That allows us to justify anger or bitterness or whatever else we’re feeling, while at that same time canceling outreach, empathy, and anything else that could give God glory through ministry. But we need to remember that our judging others never defines somebody else. Rather, our judging others defines us.

And maybe worst of all, judging also profoundly does something to the salvation message that God authored and that Jesus carried out — it cancels it. You see, judging is all about

law. You broke the law; you're a sinner. Very true, except that, 2,000 years ago, God sent his Son into the world to offer salvation through another truth: Grace, the undeserved favor that God showed us through Jesus Christ. Christ fulfilled God's law in every detail. And then he showed God's love in an action beyond words: He offered to swap his sinless life for anybody's and everybody's sin-filled lives. He took the judgment that should have been ours. That grace, that completely undeserved favor, was freely given, but it came with an awful price: the horrific death of God's one and only Son. If we live unaware of our sin, we live unaware of Christ's complete and perfect sacrifice. And living unaware of Christ's sacrifice makes one eternally lost.

We will never be the Christians God desires us to be, or the church family God desires us to be, if we forget that simple Bible maxim: We are ALL sinners! We all fall; we all fail. That is not theory or philosophy or something we just talk about between these walls. Us all being sinners is a fact! The only thing that keeps that from becoming the end of the story is what Christ did on the cross. And the only good that will ever be in us will be the indwelling of God's Son, Jesus Christ, through his Holy Spirit in our lives, only made possible by what Christ did on the cross.

CONCLUSION

So, moving forward let's never forget this woman: the agony of sin replaced by the joy of forgiveness, realized only through the person of Jesus Christ. She no longer needed to fear judgment; Jesus would be taking her judgment on the cross — the same place he took our judgment as well. But it was her awareness of sin that made her forgiveness of sin through Christ that much sweeter — and likely changed her attitude toward others for the rest of her life. That's what being forgiven does. That's what it's supposed to do — be a constant reminder of the difference between what we were, and what only through Christ we are now. That's what all mankind has been offered — through the cross. That's what Christ died for, and that's what we live for. Let's pray!