

RADICAL LOVE IN A RISKY WORLD:
RADICAL LOVE IS FORGIVING
Luke 7:36-50

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Alexander Pope said “To err is human, to forgive is divine.” Lewis Smedes says, “God invented forgiveness as a remedy for a past that not even he could change nor forget.” Jesus said, “*Your sins are forgiven. Those who are forgiven much, love much.*”

Come, let us take a closer look. Jesus is invited to join Simon the Pharisee for dinner. Why Simon invited Jesus is anybody’s guess. Maybe Simon sincerely wanted to know Jesus. Maybe dinner was a trap. Maybe Simon was just curious and decided to find out for himself about the man of growing notoriety. Whatever the motive, Jesus accepts the invitation.

Dinner parties of the rich and famous in our day take place in secluded mansions or heavily guarded ball rooms. Such was not the case in Jesus’ day. Dining happened in open courtyards, in public, in an open kind of place. When I was in Greece late last year, I was shocked by the way people, cats, dogs, and cars all shared the same space. You could dine in a fine restaurant and clean the headlights of passing motorists at the same time. It gave me a new definition of close quarters.

It was somewhat like that in Palestine. While Jesus and Simon ate bread and drank wine, pedestrians passed by. Some of them stopped to listen. One was a woman of the night who lived a sinful life in that town. When she saw Jesus reclining at Simon’s table, she stood behind him weeping, wetting his feet with her tears. Then doing something no respectable woman would do in public, she let her hair down and dried the tears with her hair, kissed his feet, and poured perfume on them — quite a moving, sensuous sight that causes Simon concern and gives Jesus the opportunity to teach a powerful lesson about forgiveness. The scene leaves us with questions too.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Forgiveness is a debt canceled. In trying to explain things to Simon, Jesus tells a story. It’s a story about two men who owed money to a certain money lender. One owed 500 days of work. The other owed 50. But neither could pay. So the lender canceled the debt for both of them. Now which of them will love him more? Don’t you wish all sermons were that short and direct?

Forgiveness is the cancellation of a debt. Forgiveness is free but it is not cheap. When Dr. Gene Nichol, president of William and Mary College ordered the cross removed from Wren Chapel on that campus, he failed to anticipate the outcry from alumni and others. He now admits he acted hastily and has ordered the cross returned, at least all day on Sunday.

I understand the offensive nature of the cross. It's too blunt, too brutal for our refined minds to encounter. All that stuff about a pierced side, nail-scarred hands, and a thorn-torn brow sounds gross in refined houses of worship. But debts are canceled because somebody paid the price. The cross was offensive in the first century too. And limited as it may be, I am still content to sing:

Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe.
Sin had left its crimson stain;
He washed me white as snow.

Forgiveness is made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By His blood, the debt of sin is canceled. Thanks be to God.

Forgiveness is life restored. What transformed this woman of the night into a servant of the light is nothing less than a miracle of love!

Tony de Mello tells this story: "Everyone kept telling me to change. I agreed I needed to change but I couldn't — no matter how hard I tried. I felt powerless, trapped, confused. Then one day a friend said, 'I love you just the way you are.' It was the most freeing thing I've ever known in my life. Suddenly I relaxed. I came to life. I found the power to change. He taught me the very deep nature of God's love for me." God starts with us where we are.

Forgiveness. Yes, it's a debt canceled but it is more than that. Forgiveness is a life restored. Clemmie Greenleaf is a 46-year-old advocate for the homeless in Nashville, Tennessee. She has lived in Nashville all her life. She lost her parents when she was 13. They were both alcoholics. Prostitution became the only way Clemmie could make enough money to take care of her younger siblings. So she turned to the streets, and drugs, and violence. Then as Clemmie tells it, "God called me by name when I was 40. I entered the Magdalene Recovery Program in 2000. By 2003 I was clean, sober, and able to hold a job." Let us never forget that God takes people where they are and loves them back to life. He not only restores our souls, He restores our self-worth, our value. That's what forgiveness is all about. It's a life restored, brought back to life.

FORGIVENESS: WHO NEEDS IT?

That's really what this story is all about. Who needs it? On the one hand it's clear that sinners need it. Everybody knows the woman is a sinner. They really don't have to tell us three or four times in this text that she's a sinner. You've got to give credit for the honesty of the Scripture that just sort of tells it the way it is. It doesn't sugar coat evil or psychologize wrong or minimize mistakes. There is freedom of just being honest. That's what I tried to say last Sunday in the sermon. Sinners need to be forgiven.

You remember what Paul says again and again in his letters, "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*"

St. Francis said, "There is nowhere a more wretched and more miserable sinner than I."

People close to God have a sensibility to sin, a pain to feel it near. They have an awareness of how far they have to go to truly live a godly life. So they are grateful and humble. Who needs to be forgiven? Sinners need to be forgiven. Of course we do. We always do.

The point of this story is this. Self-righteous people who think they are not sinners at all need forgiveness too. Jesus does not distinguish between sin in high places and sin in low places. The woman was a sinner and knew it. The Pharisee was a sinner too, and couldn't see it.

A little later in Luke 18, Jesus tells another story about self-righteousness. We call it the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. Both go to the temple. Both say their prayers. The Pharisee says, "*God, I thank you that I am not like other people — not a robber, not an evil doer, not an adulterer, not even like this tax collector beside me.*" Jesus concludes — there is no forgiveness with attitudes like that. People who see no need are not about to be freed. Self-righteousness blocks us from the grace of God.

Brennan Manning in that powerful book Ruthless Trust says "The great weakness of the North American Church is our refusal to accept our brokenness. We hide it, we evade it, we gloss over it, we look for the cosmetic kit and put on our virtuous face to make ourselves admirable to the public. We have not found power over our weakness because we cannot admit we have a weakness. When we have no need, we experience no grace.

FORGIVENESS: HOW CAN I RECEIVE IT?

By grace. By the unmerited, unearned, unconditional love of God. Verse 48 — "*Jesus said to the woman, 'Your sins are forgiven.'*" This gives a lot of people trouble because everybody can't be going around forgiving people's sins. They had a high view of that so they had problems when Jesus did that. But don't miss the phrase, "*Jesus said to her your sins (your sins) are forgiven.*" For most of us who sit in this Sanctuary today, if we could earn forgiveness, we'd have a lot more of it. We like to do it ourselves. We like to prove our own way. We like to think we came up the hard way and made it on our own. If forgiveness was something that we accomplished we would be experts at forgiveness, at being forgiven.

An unloved child spends the night with a blessed child. She sees the love and affection her friend receives from her parents and significant others. The little girl goes home to her dysfunctional family determined to earn that kind of affection from her parents. She brushes her teeth, she makes her bed, she minds her 'P's and Q's,' never cries, never throws a temper tantrum. But things stay the same. Nothing changes. For love is not something we earn. Love is something we receive. When it's undeserved love, we call it grace.

We respond to grace with gratitude. Okay, the prostitute wasn't altogether proper about it. She interrupted a dinner party, the water she used was not from

the ground but from the bottom of her heart. She doesn't kiss Jesus' cheek, she kisses his feet. She lets her hair down, something that no woman would ever do. And she anoints him, not with cheap olive oil, but precious perfume. So she hadn't mastered all the skills of high places, she's been used to living in low places. But could anyone doubt her love, even if it was sensually expressed? What do you do with grace? You say thank you and have sense enough to receive it. That's what you do with grace.

How do you receive forgiveness? You receive it by faith, that's how you receive it. Verse 50: *"And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you, go in peace.'"*

Faith is the rare courage to act on that which you cannot yet prove to be true.

Faith is leaving a fresh grave with enough hope to carry on.

Faith is writing a song of thanksgiving when the rent is due.

Faith is accepting forgiveness when it seems nothing more than a distant dream.

Faith is proclaiming peace while you still feel the turmoil inside.

Faith is letting your hair down enough to receive the mercy of God.

The just live by faith, not certitude.

Have you received the forgiveness that God alone provides? Forgiveness — Do you feel the need? Forgiveness — Have you tasted its joy? Forgiveness — It's God's great hope for flawed people. Forgiveness — It is meant for you.

Amen.