

LUKE 7:36-50
THE STORY OF LOVE

I know this has happened to you. (Young people, I know this will happen to you.) You are painting a room. You were sure you bought enough paint, but the can is almost empty and you have a lot of wall left. You grind the roller into the bottom of the roller pan, then you drive the roller into the wall. You scrape the sides of the paint can with your brush, then you spread and spread and spread the remaining paint.

Finally, you stand back from the wall. The deep, rich tone of the first wall gives way to a thin tone on the last wall, and a dirty white in the last corner. You have tried and tried, but there is nothing left in the can. You reluctantly go for more paint.

I offer you this image, as we re-enter the third scene of our story: the scene of redemption. We are visiting various places in the gospel of Luke, as we meet the Savior who rescues us from our sin and frees us to live a new life for God. Such rescue is ours when we receive the forgiveness that Jesus provides - a forgiveness he declares to the woman in today's story.

Yet as we read this story, we do not encounter a discourse on the details of that forgiveness. We find a picture of how redemption transforms the redeemed. We read a story of love. In some ways, love is like paint. Just as paint cans run short of paint, our hearts may run short of love. In this portion of the scene of redemption, we discover the source for a well of love that never runs dry in the hearts of the redeemed, as we live this scene of our story.

Where is your heart this morning? Is it running dry of love, like an emptying paint can? Join me in entering this story of many sins and much love.

This is first a story about **MANY SINS**. We learn this when we meet the woman and the Pharisee. Jesus has come to eat a meal with this Pharisee, and he and the other guests are reclining at the Pharisee's table. Then *THE WOMAN* appears.

She has lived a sinful life - probably as a prostitute. She has lived this sinful life in that town - so she is known and notorious. She has somehow learned that Jesus is eating at this house. In those days and in that culture, such a meal would be open to observers. People could watch the meal and listen to some interesting conversation. So the woman is allowed to enter, but it is risky for her to do this, because she is so known and notorious.

Yet the woman not only enters the room, but she takes center stage in this drama. We see her come to Jesus and perform three acts:

1. She washes. With her tears, she wets Jesus' feet and cleans them with her hair. This is an extremely personal act, because in those days and in that culture, a respectable woman would never "let her hair down" in public.

2. She kisses. She does not kiss his face, but his feet. This is bold display of affection for Jesus - and everyone can see it.

3. She blesses. She carries a jar with costly perfume. The jar probably has a long neck, and she breaks the long neck and pours out the expensive perfume - all over his feet.

This requires courage. This reflects passion. Yet as well, this declares humility. In those days and in that culture, the feet were the dirtiest part of the body. No one wanted to touch anyone else's feet - much less wash, kiss and bless those feet. But the woman comes to Jesus and humbly loves and serves him in this way.

THE PHARISEE sees this and responds to this. He has invited Jesus to eat. Jesus and the Pharisees are not always great friends, so we cannot be sure of his reason for hosting Jesus. But we quickly discover his attitudes through Jesus. As the Pharisee watches this woman washing, kissing and blessing, he mutters 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."

This is the expected response for a Pharisee. In those days and in that culture, they are religious leaders,

and they are all about God, God's people and God's Word. But their religion is not just a bunch of lofty ideas. It is always practical and thoroughly ethical. The Pharisees have used God's Word to develop all sorts of regulations to direct the behavior of God's people. They work hard to live their lives in conformity to those regulations. So it is natural for them to see themselves as morally and ethically superior, especially compared to a sinful woman like this.

The Pharisees do not see themselves as sinless or perfect. The Pharisees do not ignore their need of God's grace. But still their relationship with God is rooted in achievement. They have performed well enough to declare themselves less sinful than others. Like most people, they are glad to congratulate themselves about this - and remind others of this.

Pastor Steve Brown tells the story of going to dinner with a friend. As they walked into the restaurant, his friend pointed to a nearby mountain. "Last year," Steve's friend said, "I climbed up on that mountain, looked out over the town, and said to the Lord, 'Lord, I'm the only one left.' Steve asked what the Lord said in response. His friend said, "He laughed and told me, 'You've got to be kidding.'"

The Pharisees are not laughing or kidding. They believe they are just about the only ones left who are achieving holiness before the Lord. So when this Pharisee sees this woman serving and loving Jesus, he is disgusted that Jesus would let her touch him, for she is a sinner.

Now - here is a question. To whom do you relate better? Whose life better reflects your life? The woman or the Pharisee? Be honest. Do not think what you think I want you to think.

The answer is that for most of us this morning, our lives better reflect the life of the Pharisee. We have our standards. We have our rules. We will do what we will do, and we will not do what some other people do, and we will look down on those who do what we will not do, and who will not do what we do. Maybe our standards come from the Bible. Maybe our standards come from our families. Maybe our standards come from our culture. Maybe our standards come from our imaginations. But we have them, and we will not suffer those who do not follow them as we do. Many sins? That is the story of the woman - not the Pharisee of you and me.

But we need to go deeper. This is a story of many sins, but it is also a story of **MUCH LOVE**. We see this when we read *JESUS' STORY* - a short little tale he tells to the Pharisee. He knows what this man is muttering in his heart, so he searches that heart by telling this tale.

Two men owe money - a lot of money. A denarius is a day's wages, so one man owes a debt that is equal to almost two months of his wages, and the other man owes a debt that is equal to about a year-and-a-half of his wages. Both have a problem, although one has a bigger problem.

But the moneylender is a merciful man. He knows these men do not have the money to repay the debts, and he may guess they will never have the money to repay the debts, so he cancels them. He graciously forgives them. He does not take them to the debt collector. He does not shake them down or rough them up. He says, "You owe me nothing anymore." He does not owe this to them, and they could not expect this of them. But he does it anyway.

Jesus ends his tale with a question for the Pharisee: "Who will love him more?" You have two men, and they have both been forgiven a big debt - but one has been forgiven a really big debt. Who will truly, deeply, passionately love this man who has been so gracious to them?

The answer is obvious. We do not know if the Pharisee offers it with a gleeful shout or with a grudging mumble, but he gets it right: the one who has been forgiven the most, will love the most. They may both love, but the man with the greater debt will possess and express the greatest love.

So what is *JESUS' POINT*? He starts by recalling what this woman has done:

1. She has washed as an act of kindness. In those days and in that culture, you would usually give your guests water to wash themselves when they arrived at your home after a dusty journey. The Pharisee did not do this for Jesus. But the woman did this, and even more - she wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

2. She has kissed as an act of affection. In those days and in that culture, you would often greet one another with a kiss. The Pharisee did not do this for Jesus. But the woman did this, and even more - she kissed not his face, but his feet.

3. She has blessed with kindness and affection. In those days and in that culture, the perfume and its oils may have had some hygienic value - maybe to clean or moisten skin. But certainly, the perfume would be a sign of God's blessing by God's Spirit. The Pharisee did not give this to Jesus. But the woman did this, and even more - she gave an expensive jar for this blessing.

After this comparison, Jesus drives home his point: "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Jesus is not saying that she has somehow earned her forgiveness. He is saying that her response reveals her love for the One who has provided the forgiveness of her many sins.

Let's say it this way: Few sins, little love. Many sins, much love.

In his book, "Holiness By Grace," Bryan Chapell tells the story of a girl who brought home a chocolate teddy bear from school. The next day, the girl's mother found the girl's little brother eating the chocolate teddy bear. The mother told the boy that he would have to tell his sister. He had an awful day, but when she arrived home, he ran to her and confessed what he had done.

The girl's heart was full of grace, and she hugged him, kissed him and said, "It's okay...I will love you anyway and always." Through his tears, the little boy began to giggle. With joy in his heart, he hugged his sister as hard as he could.

Few sins, little love. Many sins, much love. This story changes our story. How?

First, *this changes our perspective*. A few minutes ago, I asked if your life looks more like the life of the Pharisee, or the life of the woman. There is much to commend in the life of the Pharisee. As we grow in our relationship with Jesus, we will certainly put off sinful habits and put on holy habits.

But Jesus is concerned with far more than behavior. He wants to see your heart - just like he saw the Pharisee's heart. What about that? When we see inside our hearts, we realize we are much more like the sinful woman than we care to admit. Even if we conform and obey on the outside, our hearts are cesspools of pride, lust, greed, hatred, jealousy and a million other messes. We may look good on the outside, but we are corrupt and broken on the inside. We have many sins that require much forgiveness.

We need this new perspective every day. The Christian life is about putting off sinfulness and putting on holiness. But when the result is a heart like that of the Pharisee, we become proud. We think of ourselves as better than others. We look down on those who do not conform and perform like us. We are back in the cesspool that we hide so well with our respectability.

Christian leader Carl Henry once asked, "How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?" At the cross, Jesus secured forgiveness for our many sins. We are all great debtors to amazing grace. Should we not live with a new perspective of humility?

Many sins, much love. Next, *this changes our motive*. Why do we do what we do, as we live as followers of Jesus Christ?

Sometimes our motive is guilt. We have all felt guilty, and we have all known people who know how to "guilt" us. Apart from the redemption of Jesus, we should feel guilty. But with the redemption of Jesus, we must grasp that Jesus has secured the forgiveness of our guilt.

But do we? Or do we still think we can do something to get God to love us? Is our supposed love for God, just medicine that we use to try and heal our guilt ourselves? If you say you are a Christian, and you act because of guilt, you need a new motive.

Sometimes our motive is pride. We begin to put off sin and put on holiness, and we forget that this is all because of the goodness of Jesus to us. We think we are doing well, and doing well enough. Surely God is so pleased with me, because I am serving him like this and like that.

Christian, God is indeed pleased with you. But it is not because of what you have done - it is because of

what Jesus has done. When you pridefully believe you have arrived, or that you are surely farther along than the people around you, you become passive. You can simply sit back and cruise through life, judging those who are not as good as you. But if you are a Christian, and you live filled with pride, you need a new motive.

Sometimes our motive is guilt, sometimes our motive is pride. Always, our motive ought to be love. When I become aware of the amazing and unending love of God in Jesus Christ, when I realize I am the person with a debt I cannot pay, and when I see that I have a Savior who has paid that debt for me, my heart is stirred with love, and I long to love and serve the One who loved me and served me by giving his life for me.

How will my paint can not run dry? How will I have a constant supply of love, that I may love God and people? Guilt will run dry, and pride will run dry. I will love as I should, only as God's love saturates my heart. Just as paint soaks into walls, I want God's love to soak into me, that it may be displayed in me.

Many sins, much love. Finally, *this changes our goal*. What do I want from my life? Do I just blindly and blandly wander through life, content with myself and my achievements? Or do I pursue the heart of the sinful woman, who knew how much she had been forgiven, and longed to lavishly love the Savior who loved her first?

We live in an American church culture that is content with mediocrity. We are satisfied to live like the Pharisee, avoiding this and avoiding that, but never truly serving our God with the passion he is due. Sometimes the paint supply is pretty low.

Would you join me in seeking after something different? Father, how I wish you would so fill us with this truth: "Many sins, much love," that we would be compelled to high goals for our service. Not out of guilt, not out of pride, but with a pure and growing love for the God who has loved us in his Son, may we be a community of people who will not settle for the averageness of the Christian culture around us.

How is God calling you to serve and love him today? Is it a call to overcome temptation? Is it a call to remain in a difficult marriage? Is it a call to serve an enemy? Is it a call to care for a needy person? Is it a call to confess your sin against a brother or sister in Jesus? Is it a call to courageously stand for what is right in your school or community? Is it a call to show Jesus and speak of Jesus to others - here or in a foreign land? May God fill you with the goal of the exorbitant, extravagant love of this sinful woman - a woman who knew she had many sins, and had much love for the Savior who redeemed her from those sins.

My heart often returns to a moving story from the last day of the Civil War. The victorious General Ulysses S. Grant and the defeated General Robert E. Lee were meeting at Appomattox. As the two men reviewed the terms of Lee's surrender, Lee asked if his men could keep their horses. Grant said no. But then he said, "Well, the subject is quite new to me...I take it that most of the men are small farmers, and as the country has been so (damaged) by the two armies it is doubtful whether they will be able to put in a crop to carry themselves and their families through the next winter without the aid of the horses they are now riding." Then Grant graciously agreed to the request. The conquerer, who had every right to extract every shred of justice, chose to give mercy.

Witnesses say General Lee responded with relief. He said, "This will have the best possible effect upon the men. It will be very gratifying, and will do much toward (reconciling) our people."

Many sins, much love. For you of many sins, may the redemption of Jesus have the best possible effect upon you. May it result in much love.