



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 7:36–50

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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Have you ever received an invitation to someone's home that baffled you? Perhaps the person who invited you had at one time been more of an enemy than a friend. Perhaps you wondered how, if you went, you could possibly get through the evening without your disagreements bubbling to the surface. Back in the late 90's Gordon MacDonald, an evangelical pastor and writer, who has been a friend to this church, received such an invitation from Bill Clinton in the midst of the scandals that plagued his presidency. Clinton wasn't exactly known as a friend of evangelical believers, but he said he wanted MacDonald as one of his spiritual advisers. Under a great deal of criticism MacDonald accepted the invitation. He told his flock that critics should ask themselves why they keep assuming the worst of this president. He said, "I have seen his private tears, heard his personal words of remorse. And I have chosen to embrace this man as a sinner in need of mercy. I have received him as I would try to receive any of you should you find yourself in a similar circumstances."

How would you respond to such an invitation?

Jesus accepts a dinner invitation from a Pharisee.

One evening, Jesus got an invitation from a Pharisee named Simon for dinner. **"Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table"** (Luke 7:36). There is something strange about this. There was very little meeting of the minds between the Pharisees and Jesus, but a lot of butting heads.

To understand why you have to understand the Pharisees. They were so careful to obey the law of Moses that they wanted it tightened up. God said, "I want you to love me with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. Here are ten things to help you do that." One of the things was to keep the Sabbath day holy. They asked, "Well, how can we do that? Let's tighten it up a bit." They reasoned that any expenditure of energy is work. Then they asked, "How do you measure that and how much is too much on the Sabbath?" They said, "Well, the OT says that the Holy of Holies should be 2000 cubits away from the nearest home. You have to go to church on the sabbath so that means it's okay to walk 2000 cubits on the Sabbath." So they said that anything more than 2000 cubits (about 1000 yards) is work and a violation of the Sabbath. Later some of them realized that really wasn't very far, so they decided not make the measurement of

2000 cubits be from your house but from the border of your city. That will allow for a few more yards. Anyone who goes more than 2000 cubits from the border of their city really doesn't love God. Now all of this may sound ridiculous to us, but it's called religion and people do this all the time. Jesus came along and said, "Enough already. You've lost the point. Let's get back to the original." He showed them what it really meant to love God and love your neighbor.

You can understand why Jesus wasn't very popular with the Pharisees. So it's surprising that this Pharisee named Simon would invite him to dinner. That was considered an expression of friendship, especially in those days. What was his motive? Was he saying, "I really think this Jesus may be the One. Look at all these miracles. Shouldn't we give this guy a chance? Let's spend some time with him; get him away from the crowds and see what's really beneath the surface." Or were his motives less noble? Maybe he was setting a trap. Simon might have thought, "Have a nice dinner. Drink a little wine. He'll let his hair down. Somewhere along the line, he's bound to slip." The fact is we really don't know why Simon invited Jesus to dinner.

It didn't seem to matter all that much to Jesus, because he goes with no questions asked. One of the things people would like to accuse Jesus of is a kind of reverse prejudice. "All he does is care about the outcasts and the most sinful people. He's a friend of tax collectors and sinners, but what about regular folks? What about folks who are honest, moral, hard working and law-abiding? Doesn't he care about them?" But here we see that you cannot accuse Jesus of that kind of thinking. He's just as willing to go to the home of Simon the Pharisee as he is to go to the home of Matthew the tax collector.

A sinful woman enters and anoints Jesus.

The funny thing is, though, that it was hard to keep sinners away from him. That night there was a remarkable intrusion during dinner. As they ate dinner, a woman interrupts the meal with an extremely emotional and totally inappropriate display of affection for Jesus.

"And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept

wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner'" (vv. 37–39).

In order to understand this you have to know something about how homes were built back then. Homes of wealthy people were built around central courtyards where formal meals were served. The guests would actually recline on low lying couches, resting their heads on their left hand and eating with their right. Their feet would extend out from the table because feet were considered unclean and offensive. At a dinner party like this, the doors to the courtyard were kept open, and uninvited people from the village were actually allowed to come in and observe the meal and the conversation. So in and of itself it's not all that unusual that an uninvited person like this woman would be there.

On the other hand, this was a shocking occurrence. First of all, she goes from the bleachers to the playing field. It's one thing to watch the meal from a distance, quite another to step right up to the table! But the real shocker was that a woman LIKE THIS would do such a thing. Luke says she was a "sinner." You say, "So what, we're all sinners." But this was a special term that meant she was known for sexual promiscuity. She was either the town prostitute or a well-known adulterous.

To everyone's amazement, she comes from the crowd, stands at Jesus' feet, and takes an alabaster vial of perfume, which women wore around their neck as an ornament. Her intention is to offer a costly gift to Jesus; to anoint him with her perfume. She breaks the thin neck of the vial with her trembling hands and kneels down to pour it out on Jesus' feet. At this point, everything goes wrong. She breaks out into tears and her tears are falling on the Master's feet. She's terribly embarrassed by this. She has no towel, so she lets her hair down and begins to wipe his feet off with her hair. That, by the way, was socially unacceptable. A woman was only allowed to loosen her hair in the presence of her husband. Rabbis put letting down your hair in the same category as uncovering your breasts. So you can imagine the wide-eyed guests! While she does that, overwhelmed with emotion, she begins to kiss his feet as well. Again, you just didn't do that. This woman is a slobbering mess, tears falling, nose running, stringy hair mixed with dirt, tears and perfume. Emily Post would turn over in her grave!

Simon says to himself, "If this man were a

prophet, he would know what sort of person this woman is who is touching him, that she is a sinner." Simon mulls over the matter and reaches a conclusion: "There is no way this guy is a prophet. If Jesus were a prophet he would know what kind of woman this was. This is based on the assumption that if he were a prophet and he knew what kind of a woman she was, he wouldn't let her do this. Godly people just don't mix with people like her, especially at this level. Notice he says to himself that she was "touching him." The word "touch" has sexual overtones. Simon is indignant. He thinks she's coming on to Jesus. If it were him, he would have kicked her away.

Jesus explains the woman's actions.

"And Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' And he replied, 'Say it, Teacher.' 'A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?' Simon answered and said, 'I suppose the one whom he forgave more.' And He said to him, 'You have judged correctly'" (vv. 40–43).

But before Simon could say anything, Jesus turns to him and says, "Simon, I'd like to say something to you." Simon says, "Go ahead, teacher." It's clear that Jesus knows what Simon is thinking. It's interesting, Simon had thought, "if this man were a prophet he would have known..." Now we begin to see that not only did Jesus know what SHE was, he knew what Simon was—proof by Simon's own criteria that he is a prophet!

Jesus proceeds to tell him a little story: "A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both."

It is important to understand a few things about this story. A denarius was the wage for one day's work. Given that they worked six days a week, that would mean they made about 300 denarii a year. Five hundred denarii is a rather massive debt akin to 20 months salary! These guys had to be pretty desperate to go to a moneylender who would rip them off at exorbitant interest rates. But Jesus says "he graciously forgave" their debt. To forgive is to cancel a debt. And when the moneylender decides to forgive the debt, he has to bear the cost himself. That's what forgiveness is. It's not just saying forget it; it's saying, I no longer hold you responsible and I will assume the loss myself.

Jesus wants Simon to come to his own conclusion about this, so he asks him, "So which one of them will love him more?" In other words, which one will be more grateful and express their loving gratitude to the moneylender the most?" The answer is obvious, but Simon, who most likely is getting the gist of the story, answers reluctantly: "Well, I suppose the one who was forgiven the most."

Bingo! Jesus says, "You've judged correctly." And

then he goes on to compare the woman's extravagant display of love for Jesus with Simon's neglect.

“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. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little’” (vv. 44–47).

Simon neglected to do the normal things that hosts did for welcomed guests. But this woman more than made up for it. And why? Jesus tells Simon it was because she had come to understand the wonders of forgiveness while Simon hadn't. Somewhere along the line this woman had met Jesus. She had watched him deal with sinners like herself. She had watched his tender care for the poor in spirit. Maybe she had even had some private encounter with him where the reality of her forgiveness had been cemented in her mind. Jesus says, “Simon, don't you see? You said it yourself—she has shown me this extravagant love because she knows how much she has been forgiven. But you sit there and criticize her. Has it ever dawned on you that the reason you have neglected to show me even the common courtesies of a host is that you have no concept of your need of forgiveness that I bring to you? Simon, it's true for you and it's true for everyone: those who love me much are those who just can't get over how much they have been forgiven.

Jesus sets the woman free.

“Then He said to her, ‘Your sins have been forgiven.’ Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this man who even forgives sins?’ And He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” (vv. 48–50).

Then Jesus turns to the woman and says. “Your sins have been forgiven.” She already knew it, but Jesus wanted everyone else to hear it from his own mouth. This caused even more of a stir. I'm sure a few of them choked on their lamb, “Who is this man who even forgives sin?” But Jesus ignores them. He continues to focus on the woman. “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

What can we learn from this?

There are two kinds of sin and sinners.

One of the things we can learn is that there are different kinds of sins because there are different kinds of sinners. It is obvious to us that Simon needs forgiveness just like the woman does. They are similar in that way, but the similarity ends there. There is little similarity in their lifestyles. The one is a reprobate; the other is respectable.

But from the parable we know they are both debtors; they are both sinners. So there are reprobate sins committed by reprobate sinners and there are respectable sins committed by respectable sinners. This is hard for us to grasp. You can be a good person according to the standards of our day but still have an unpayable debt of sin.

Years ago I was in Sicily and had a chance to visit Mt. Etna, an active volcano. As you know, volcanos are mountains with a crust full of molten lava. Sometimes the crust is so thick and strong that the lava is held inside, but sometimes things happen that create a fissure in the crust that allows the lava to flow out.

We are like volcanos. Most of us have a strong crust to our lives. Some of us have a religiously acceptable crust, or at least a socially acceptable one. Like Simon, we were born and raised that way. Others have a crust like this woman had prior to meeting Jesus. Why was she the way she was? Perhaps she had been abused as a child. Or perhaps her husband had put her out on the streets and she had no other way to make a living. Either way, whether you are like the Pharisee or the woman, inside the crust is a molten mass called sin. It's in all of us. That may be hard for us to grasp because we tend to think of sin in terms of outward action like lying and stealing and killing and sleeping around. But all sin starts with an attitude towards God. It starts with a molten mass of independence. The crust may be so strong that it rarely lets the lava out, but there will be times when it does. Sometimes a small crack will form in our religious crust and out flows pride, resentment and words that cut to the bone. For others it may come out as it did in this woman in a flow of promiscuity or addiction or crime. There is a wide variety of sin because there is a wide variety of sinners, but the one thing we all have in common is that we're debtors and in need of forgiveness.

Jesus is prepared to forgive both kinds of sin and sinners.

Another thing we can learn from this is that Jesus is prepared to forgive either kinds of sin and sinners. Whether your sin is of the reprobate variety or covered by a respectable crust, Jesus has the willingness and the authority to forgive your sin. Just like the moneylender forgave the debt of both, by assuming the debt himself, so Christ has assumed your debt by dying on the cross. That's why Jesus came—to bear the cost himself.

But that forgiveness has to be received. Jesus tells us in his words to the woman that it is received by faith. It was not her extravagant display of love that saved her; it was her faith that saved her. You cannot earn forgiveness or salvation. It's graciously offered at great cost by the moneylender himself and all we can

do is receive it.

It stands to reason that in order to do that we have to understand not only the magnitude of our debt but our own inability to pay it off. Sometimes what we try to do is pay it off with a currency of our own making. Perhaps we try to pay it off with the currency of our integrity: "God, I work with a bunch of liars. I'm the only one I know who tells the truth. That has to be enough." Others would say that their family currency is enough: "Lord, I'm faithful to my wife. I have three great kids. In this X-rated world my life is a wholesome G." Social currency is a favorite too: "Lord, I'm nice person. I do what I can to help others in need. I belong to the Rotary." Perhaps the biggest delusion is that we can pay our debt with our church currency: "Lord, I've taught Sunday School for ten years. My kids all go to the youth group. I helped pay for the building." But, you see, as long as we try to pay our own debt, we can't receive his gift of forgiveness. We have to come to him and say, "I'm broke. I have a debt of sin that is so great I can't begin to pay it off."

To people who come to him like that, he says, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." He commands us to go in peace with the knowledge of our forgiveness. We don't have to go in guilt and shame.

A little boy was visiting his grandparents. They lived in the country and they gave him his first sling shot to try out in the woods. He tried and he practiced, but he could never hit his target. As he came back to his Grandma's backyard, he spotted her pet duck. On an impulse, he took aim and let it fly. The stone hit it square and the duck fell dead. The boy panicked. He desperately hid the dead duck in a woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing. After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" And then she whispered to him, "Remember the duck." So Johnny did the dishes. Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "Sorry, but Sally needs to stay home and help me cook dinner." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." Again, she whispered, "Remember the duck." Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing. After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he couldn't stand it. He confessed to his Grandma that he'd killed her duck. She looked at him, gave him a big hug and said, "I know. I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. I wondered how long you would allow Sally to make a slave of you. I already forgave you. I was just waiting for you

to come to me to tell me."

Many of us are like Johnny. We live like slaves even though we already have been forgiven. When Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven; go in peace," he really means it. But he wants us to come to him.

Those who love Jesus much are those who just can't get over how much they have been forgiven.

But the most important thing we learn from this story is that those who love Jesus much are those who just can't get over how much they've been forgiven. The issue is not just how much you've been forgiven in an objective sense, but it's your own subjective internalization of that. What is important is not just a consciousness of sin, but a consciousness of forgiveness.

Imagine for just a minute how you would feel if you left here this morning knowing that any and all financial debt you now have has been paid off. Some of us have mortgages that rival the GNP of a third world country. Some have credit card debt so large the minimum payment is the size of a house payment in Iowa. Some of you have the burden of paying off college loans. Imagine how you would feel if you knew someone paid it all off while you were sitting here this morning. How would you feel? What if you even found out who it was that paid it off, what would you do? How would you thank them?

Somehow we have to find a way to keep that feeling alive. Because God has done something greater than forgive our financial debt, at great cost to himself, he has forgiven our spiritual debt.

Those who know that will show it in outward ways. Like this woman, their love and gratitude for Jesus will leak out all over the place. And sometimes it will even be expressed in ways others feel are inappropriate. That love and gratitude will be expressed in worship—both personal worship and public worship. Throughout the day they will mutter thanksgivings for his gracious forgiveness. They will come to church, and excuse me for being direct, they will come on time. They will not want to miss one prayer or one song of worship because it's an expression of gratitude and love to the One who set them free. That love and gratitude will also be expressed in giving. Far from being forced to give, they would beg for the opportunity to give. Not just their money but their time and talents. People would be begging to teach Sunday School, to lead in the Junior High and High School ministries, to be small group leaders and to share their faith in the community. The idea of being able to give something back to the Lord, to further his work on earth, would be exhilarating.

Let me ask you: Have you gotten over it? Have you ever gotten over the best news a person could ever hear—that your sins, which are many, have been forgiven? Those who love him much never get over it.

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