

God's Forgiveness: Embraced or Forgotten?

by
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Good morning. Thank you all for being here this long weekend.

Most of you know me, but for those who don't or who are visitors here this weekend, my name is Richard Ormesher and I'm an elder here at Faith Community Fellowship Church. Actually this is my first year serving as an elder here and after today, I'm hoping you won't be wishing it will be my last...

My daughter told me this last week that she knows someone who, when he saw me getting out of the car one day, thought I was a grumpy old man. I can't tell you how much that warmed my heart...

Then, for reasons beyond my comprehension, a few minutes later I had them thinking I was a lovable old grandpa.

I'll leave it to you to decide whether "grumpy" or "lovable" or somewhere in between, but if you don't mind, I think we can leave the "old" well enough alone.

Anyway, I wanted to speak to you today on the topic of God's forgiveness and our response to it.

One of my favorite texts in all of Scripture about this topic is found in Luke 7:36-50.

Would you please stand, if you're able, to hear the reading of the Word of Almighty God?

Text read out loud

The Word of God for the people of God: thanks be to God.

Let's pray: Almighty God,
 To Whom all hearts are open,
 All desires known,
 And from Whom no secrets are hid.
 Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
 By the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit
 So that we may perfectly love You
 And worthily magnify Your Holy Name
 Through Christ our Lord,
 Amen.

In this text, we see a woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, and a Pharisee disgusted with the spectacle.

This woman, without doubt, is a prostitute. Different versions of the bible translate verse 37 similarly, but with slight variations:

"A woman of the city, who was a sinner" (ESV)

"A woman in the city who was a sinner" (NKJV, NASB, NRSV)

"A woman who had lived a sinful life in that town" (NIV)

There's little doubt this woman was a prostitute.

And then we have a Pharisee, named Simon. Who, by the way, is not Simon Peter, the disciple of Jesus.

To understand the context of this passage, we need to look to the texts prior to it.

Luke is addressing the bigger theme of "who is Jesus?" in the understanding of the people of the day.

If you look back into Luke 6 and 7, we see Jesus speaking to the people on the plain in His role as Prophet much like He did in the Sermon on the Mount. He then performs some miracles, confirming his role in the sight of the people.

But then, interestingly, we see John the Baptist, while he was in prison, questioning Jesus about His identity: "are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:19).

Jesus replies to John's disciples: "go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk...the deaf hear..." and so on (Luke 7:21-22). Jesus is telling John that He is fulfilling his role as Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah.

Then he talks to the people about John the Baptist as being the herald to the promised Messiah, and concludes by saying:

"For John the Baptist came neither eating bread or drinking wine and you say 'He has a demon'. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners".'" Luke 7:33-34

In the sight of the Pharisees, Jesus just can't win, can he?

And Simon is one of these Pharisees. Why on earth would one of them ever invite Jesus to dinner? Simon did, though. Perhaps to try and trap him in His words and actions? The Pharisees certainly tried that a time or two, didn't they?

Regardless, when Simon saw the woman washing His feet and that Jesus was not dismissing her, he was appalled and 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)

Pharisees would have no contact with "sinners" and Simon was therefore absolutely certain no authentic Prophet of God would ever have contact with them, either. "Sinners", after all, are subhuman, not worthy of respect, time, acknowledgement...or, especially, compassion. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan?

Jesus, knowing Simon's thoughts, says he has something to tell him and then proceeds with a very short parable, putting Simon on the spot:

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other 50. Neither had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7:41-42)

A denarius was a coin worth about a day's wages and here we have one debtor owing 10 times that of the other, neither of whom could repay their debt.

Simon cannot help but admit that great forgiveness produces great love.

Jesus then turns Simon's attention to the woman as he applies the parable's truth to the scene at hand.

Simon had failed to offer the common courtesy of a bowl of water for Jesus to wash the dirt off His feet before commencing with dinner. He also failed to extend the common courtesy of a kiss on the cheek in greeting his guest, and had failed to put the customary olive oil on Jesus' head.

The woman instead, took the part of a maid-servant and washed Jesus' feet, dried and kissed them, then anointed them with expensive perfume.

In doing this, the woman expressed deep sorry for her sin. Her tears would have ruined whatever make-up she had on, and her hair previously done up was now unbound and was being used as a towel.

She also expressed considerable affection for Christ. The tears were tears of joy as well as sorry. Without concern for what others thought, she kissed his feet with adoration and affection, finishing off by anointing his feet with the expensive perfume she had hung round her neck in an alabaster jar.

While Simon had looked on this in horror, Jesus obviously took delight in it, accepting her adoration for what it was: profound and deep love.

Jesus says: "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little, loves little."

It would be a serious error, though, to conclude that this woman had been forgiven *because* of her love for Jesus. The parable itself clearly shows love is a fruit of gracious forgiveness: debt is canceled, love follows.

Indeed, the entire bible is clear about that, too.

And the Apostle John says it point blank in his first letter:

"We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19)

This idea, though:

Whoever has been forgiven little, loves little, but whoever has been forgiven much, loves much.

is what I'd like to spend the rest of my time speaking about.

I think we live in a time when far too many of us have forgotten just how much we have been forgiven and live a life showing far too little real love.

I'll be frank – it's something that troubles me deeply.

Maybe that's why people see me as a "grumpy old man". I don't know.

But one thing I do know, Jesus says:

"If you love me, you will obey me" (John 14:15)

And

"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:21)

We know that loving God is shown by our obedience to Him. But it's more than that, isn't it?

It's in loving one another.

"Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11)

Let's not forget that each and every one of us is made in the image of God, so that in a certain way, by loving one another, we **are** loving God.

Loving God is loving Him for Who He is AND loving one another.

First of all, then, if we are ever really going to love God for Who He is, we need to know Him. Not just know about Him, but really **know** Him. Personally.

Have any of you seen the movie "Apollo 13"?

Do you remember that scene where Tom Hanks, who played Commander Jim Lovell, looked up at the moon and held up his thumb to hide the moon, then moved it back and forth? And then doing the same to the earth when he was at the moon?

The point is, the farther away it is, the smaller it seems. And the closer you get, the bigger it is. In itself, its size is the same, it's just our perspective that's different.

And it's the same with God. He never changes. He's the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. We are the ones that move away.

Indeed, every time we sin, we move away from Him. And we can so easily wander away to the point where our view of God is like a distant moon. Easily covered. Easily hidden. Easy to dismiss.

In reality, God is big. Really big. He created all things. He knows all things. He is sovereign over all things. And there is no place we can ever go where He is absent.

He never sins. He's glorious in His majesty. He is Holy.

And He's willing to forgive rebellious creatures that despise Him day in and day out.

Do we really appreciate that? Or have we forgotten just how much **we** have been forgiven?

Sin is no small thing. Sin is breaking God's law. Sin is a debt – a debt we can never repay. And sin is enmity – a broken relationship with the Father.

Do we really appreciate that every single time we sin, we're essentially giving God the middle finger, saying we know better than Him, that we are going to do things our way.

There's no question that there are degrees of sin. Engaging in verbal diarrhea, for example, is not as sinful as practicing mass murder, is it? But it's still sin.

And God does not see any sin as a small thing.

The one thing every sinner needs is loving, gracious forgiveness. Removal of our sin, payment of a debt we can never repay, and restoration of our relationship with the Father.

If you're here today and have never really experienced that forgiveness, then there's no reason why you should leave here carrying a burden of guilt that can just as easily be left at the foot of the cross.

Think of it! Forgiveness for all of your sins – every single one of them – is yours for the asking. Repent, embrace Jesus Christ today, and receive the blessing of God.

For those of us who do know that forgiveness, we need to remember just how much it cost the Father. The price Jesus Christ had to pay for our redemption.

How much does He love us? This much (*arms out wide*).

In the parable that Jesus told to Simon the Pharisee, God is the creditor and we are the debtors who **cannot** pay.

It's so easy to forget it, though.

And it's so easy to join hands with Simon by looking down our noses at all those "sinners" around us. Isn't it?

Which brings us to the second point: loving one another.

Take a look at any online forum today. Facebook comments, for example, to any topic du jour – pick a topic. Any topic! Lately, I find it's one of the most unloving places I know.

I'm not at all saying there are no positive stories and comments on Facebook – there are, as many of you know, and indeed many of you post. Some wonderful and heartwarming stories are shared by many.

I'm talking here about the negativity in the forums and comments.

Sadly, even the most banal topic can engender serious derogatory and unloving speech. Just yesterday I watched a short video on how to clean a non-stick stainless steel pan without using a scouring pad. The presenter was an older man with a slight tremor in his thumbs. And the comments about his tremor were – to say the least – mean.

Why? What's the point of being so nasty? It's so unkind and unloving, and serves no purpose other than to tear the other person down. It certainly isn't raising oneself up.

It doesn't matter what the topic is; the negativity is there. And sometimes, I'll say it, it's in your face hatred.

I remember a few years ago I engaged in an online discussion about partial birth abortion. One person didn't know what it was, so I took the time to educate her. Graphically. Not at all to be mean, but there are medical textbooks out there online that describe the procedure and I referenced them in my comments to show the facts, not just my opinion.

Out of the blue, someone else chimed in "I wish you had been aborted". I have never forgotten that.

Move on over to the political talking point of the day and I dare say it's worse – especially as we're in a heated election cycle this year. It's probably much worse. And, sadly, by many who profess to be Christians.

It's one thing to address serious matters if the need is there; it's another to do so in such an unloving, even hateful way.

That's what troubles me so deeply. The lack of love, the hate, is everywhere. Radio, TV, movies, on the bus, walking down the street, sporting events, traffic while commuting to work, and on and on.

But when I'm honest with myself, the really frightening thing: it's within.

So what's the antidote? The remedy?

Again – it's in remembering how much we ourselves have been forgiven, **knowing** that those who have been forgiven much, love much.

What does this love for one another look like? Actionable love, one to another.

We all know 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter in the bible.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no records of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Cor 13:4-8)

Let's take a minute to read it in reverse. In fact, look at the word "love" in reverse: "EVOL". Just a letter away from "evil". That's what Satan does. He takes something good and turns it around, turns it upside down.

So when read in reverse we see that a lack of love is:

- Impatient
- Mean-spirited and unkind

- Jealous
- Boastful and self-righteous
- Rude
- Selfish
- Easily angered
- Nitpicking, keeping a record of everything wrong about another
- Delights in evil and hates the truth
- No interest in caring for others
- Never trusts
- Never hopes
- Never perseveres
- Gives up and quits

I realize we could spend weeks talking about this. But let's just ask ourselves: how do we measure up? Or better yet, how far do we fall short?

Forgiven little, love little. Forgiven much, love much. Where do we stand? Where are we on that scale?

I can't do anything about the lack of love by others, but by the grace of God and remembering how much I've been forgiven, I can certainly do something about my own.

By remembering God's standard of righteousness and mine that's no better than a filthy rag, I can move from being the Pharisee who looks down his nose at "sinners" to the one who pleads "God, have mercy on me, a sinner".

By remembering that my forgiveness cost Jesus Christ His earthly life, I can at the very least love my neighbor by being kind and compassionate. By being patient with them. By not using mean-spirited words. By not being rude with them.

And by remembering the extent of God's forgiveness to me, I can forgive myself and extend the same to others.

In fact, it has been said that "we are never more like our heavenly Father than when we forgive someone."

(The Pillars of Christian Character by John MacArthur, p.85)

But when I fail, I remember I can come to God in prayer, confess my sins and know for certain He is faithful and just to forgive me from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

So how exactly do we remember? By making diligent use of the means of grace, the tools, that God has so lovingly provided:

- Reading the Word of God – in other words, being transformed by the renewing of our minds through the power of the Holy Spirit as we read Scripture
- Prayer – being renewed in fellowship with the Father, who wants us to talk to Him about everything
- Fellowship with the saints – encouraging one another in the faith
- Coming to church – where the means of grace are concentrated, hearing a Word from God about God, about us, and about grace
- Participate in the sacraments when they're presented (as they so recently were) – visible reminders of God's saving work

By doing this, we'll remember what a loving, merciful Father we have.

We'll remember what a glorious Savior we have in Jesus.

And by His grace, the fruit of righteousness – the very fruit of the Holy Spirit – will grow in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal 5:22)

It's what we need.

It's what our neighbors need to see from us.

And it's what God wants to grow in us. So that one day, we'll be welcomed into the new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness. Where there will be no more tears, no more death, and no more sin.

May God continue to have mercy on us.

Amen.