

“Mercy is For Sinners”

Luke 7:36-50

In one of the more influential books I have read in the last several years, a Presbyterian minister asks a well-known church growth pioneer to criticize him no holds barred about weaknesses the minister may have coming from his denominational background. He especially wanted a critique concerning evangelism and discipleship. One of the things the church growth pioneer said is that, as a rule, people from this minister’s group have tendencies towards elitism. He said that **“if we divide people into washed and unwashed, this minister’s group usually went after the washed.”** What he meant by “washed” is these are people who already have their act together. They can assimilate into the group very easily. **The problem with this, he said, is the vast majority of people in the world are unwashed.**

What we see in the passage is an example of this. An “unwashed woman,” if you will, interrupts the dinner of these “washed men,” these religious elites. In a very bold move, she anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume and wets them with her tears and wipes them with her hair. Simon, the host of this dinner, is offended and discounts Jesus because Jesus allows this woman to do this. The religious elite reject her. She is a sinner.

Unfortunately, we Christians often do this same thing. We treat people this way, or we ignore them all together. I also think well intentioned Christians who are not judgmental can create these kinds of distinctions of people by simply remaining in our comfort zones, and not venturing outside of what is familiar to us.

Ultimately though, I think how we view and interact with so called unwashed people has a lot to do with how we respond to mercy. Whether we receive it ourselves or whether we reject it.

As we take a look at this passage in Luke 1, want to look at it from the perspective of: **How do we respond to God’s mercy?**

We will look at:

- **The one who receives mercy.**
- **The one who rejects mercy.**
- **The one who gives mercy.**

I. The One Who Receives Mercy (verses 36-39)

Jesus is invited to dinner with a Pharisee named Simon. This is not Simon Peter the disciple. *Pharisees were a group of specially observant and influential Jews, mainly in Palestine, from the second century B.C.. to the first century A.D. The Pharisees were zealous observers of the law, prominent among the people and especially concerned with ritual purity, tithing, using food according to OT law, and correct observance of Sabbath(the term literally means separated).* These were the prominent religious people of the day. Jesus accepts his offer and goes to have dinner with him. While reclining at the table, in that time they ate in more of a half-way lying down position, a woman who was a known sinner entered in and began anointing Jesus’ feet.

A. Mercy is for Sinners (verse .37)

Mercy is something that always comes from the top down. In order to give some one mercy, you must be over them. **The definition of mercy is this: compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power** When we receive mercy from God, we realize two things. We realize we are subject to God, but we must also realize that we have offended Him. This is putting it lightly. Those of us who trust in

Christ, who are Christians, it is only because of His grace and mercy towards us that has brought us into this relationship. Romans 5:8 says while we were sinners Christ died for us.

B. Mercy Makes Us Grateful (verse 38)

³⁸ *and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.*

We don't get the benefit of knowing what exactly took place with this woman before, but we can obviously see that this woman is consumed with gratitude towards Jesus. The only proper way we can serve God is out of gratitude for what He has done for us in His Son Jesus Christ. When we realize the depth of our sin and yet receive the grace and mercy that Christ offers, then we begin to serve Him in a whole new way. Not trying to earn His love, but responding to the love He has already and continues to show us. We begin to respond with gratitude and this should more and more affect every aspect of our lives.

II. The One Who Rejects Mercy (verses 39-46)

As we take a look at this point, I am going to quote from the Gospel of Matthew. Where Luke's original audience was the Greek-speaking world Matthew's gospel was written originally for a Jewish audience. Because of this, he focuses more on the issues that pertained to them. In his seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees section found in Matthew 23, Jesus says this concerning the Pharisee's religious practices:

²³ *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”* ²⁴ *You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!*

This rejection of mercy is not something that pertains only to Simon but to the Pharisees as a whole. Really it is something that anybody can fall into. As it relates to Christians, I believe it develops with the “us and them mentality.” The first part of rejecting mercy is they **do not love mercy**.

A. Do not love mercy (verse 39)

Rather than being pleased to see this woman responding to Jesus with lavish affection, Simon shows contempt towards her. As a known religious person, he tries to put barrier between her and God. He rejects her, thinking “this woman should not even be near us.” Matthew in his gospel also addresses this issue in chapter 23:13:

¹³ *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.*

Rather than welcoming this woman who is coming into the kingdom of heaven, he tries to shut the door in her face. Simon then concludes that Jesus could not be a prophet for He would know that this woman is a sinner. Not only is He wrong in thinking that Jesus didn't know this woman's reputation, but what is significant is that Simon has no connection or understanding of the heart of God. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus said:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” ¹³ *Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”* Matthew 9:12-13 (ESV)

The heart of God is to seek and save that which is lost (Luke 19:10). Simon the Pharisee wants to show how good he is by what an upstanding person he is. But Jesus wants him to love mercy and the only real way we can love mercy is to first receive it. As we receive mercy from God, one of the first things that happens is that He opens our eyes and for the first time we see how badly we need it.

B. (Those who reject mercy) do not see their debt. (verses 40-43)

Simon said she is a sinner, but what he needed to say was that he is a sinner. Jesus showed Simon a living picture of mercy and Simon still didn't get it so Jesus tells him this parable from Luke 7:41-43 (ESV):

⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then 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. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ "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."

The denari here, which is about a working person's daily wage, does not represent the amount of guilt, but the awareness of guilt. Simon doesn't love much because he is completely unaware of his debt. He does not think he is a sinner and because of that he does not see his need for Jesus. If we do not see our need for Jesus, than we will never fully embrace him.

What Jesus did for us is so much more than provide a good example for us to follow. It is necessary for us realize this. Because of our sin, we owe a debt to God that we could never pay off. Without him paying that debt for us, we cannot have a relationship with God, and without God, our lives we will never really change. No matter how much we try to change ourselves, we never really succeed until we are relieved of the burden of our debt and the Holy Spirit begins to work within us. We may be able to look good on the outside, but without Jesus our inner core remains corrupt.

You see the Pharisees were experts on the outside: appearance, habits, discipline, regulations, and such. What Jesus confronted them with is though their outside looked good, their inside, their heart, was completely wicked. That is how it is for us as well. Until the burden of our sins is paid, we like the Pharisees can only change the outside. When we trust in Jesus, that He has paid our debt and he then begins to change our hearts from within.

If you have ever watched the TV show "Extreme Makeover—Home Edition" more than once, then you know how it always goes. The makeover team is in their motor home on the way to see the family whom they are going to help. Then they arrive to surprise them. The host (frosted hair, hyperactive guy) yells at them with his blow horn. They send the family away on a vacation. The old house is torn down and the team builds a huge extravagant new house that suits the family's special needs. During the building process which is like one week or something, there are about 500 people working on it at the same time. They always run into some problems, there is always tension on whether they can make the deadline. Then somehow every week they get it done.... just as the family is pulling up. Then the host, frosted hair guy, tells them to yell, "Move that bus!" and the family sees their spectacular new house. They jump up and down and run all through it seeing the completely new house. What is more important is that it suits their special needs. But I think the thing that ties it all together is at the end of the show. The home builder or bank or the sponsor congratulates them and gives them the keys. Then this person tells them that they have not only built them this new house, but they have paid off the mortgage on their old house.

This is very important because if they only built them this great new house without paying off their debt then slowly, but surely the spectacular brand new house would begin to look more and more like their dilapidated old house. They still have the same problems and they have a huge debt that they will never be able to repay.

Spiritually speaking, our situation is far worse than any jacked up house that has ever been on that show. We can change our habits, patterns, attitudes and actions (the outside things), but if our sin is not taken care of, if our debt is not paid then somehow, somehow all these outside improvements will ultimately deteriorate or show to have been no real value at all. All of us are in debt to God. All of us are spiritually bankrupt.

III. The One Who Gives Mercy (verses 48-50)

⁴⁸ Then He said to her, “Your sins have been forgiven.” ⁴⁹ Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this man who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ And He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

A. Forgives Our Sins (verses 48-49)

Jesus tells the woman her sins are forgiven, and the people at the table begin to question “who is this who even forgives sin”? They were well aware that only God can forgive sin. What is important to understand is that her sins are forgiven because Jesus had paid her debt. Jesus being God in the flesh did not cancel her debt, rather He paid her debt for her and for all those who would trust in Him. Jesus chose to do this because **He loves mercy**. He chose to be crucified for us to pay the debt we owe to God that we could never be able to repay. He pays the debt by taking all of our sins upon Himself, by being crucified in our place to satisfy God’s just wrath. Then in turn He gives us, He imputes to us all of His righteousness. **Again, He does this because He loves mercy.**

B. Saves (verse 50)

Jesus tells the woman “your faith has saved you.” Her salvation, the forgiveness of her sins, was not based on her ability to look good on the outside nor was it based on her affection towards Jesus. It is based on the grace and mercy that Jesus has given to her and she receives that by faith. Then Jesus tells her to “go in peace.”

When it comes to who we are before God there are no “washed people” without His mercy. There are no people who have it together. Some of the last words that the great reformer, Martin Luther, wrote were these, “We are all beggars—this is true.”

Just as this woman desperately needed the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, so did Simon the Pharisee and so do you and so do I. As we looked at this passage I wanted to look at how do we respond to God’s mercy? First off do we receive it or do we reject it? Receiving God’s mercy is not a one time event:

²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning. Lamentations 3:22-23 (ESV)

In order to grow in our faith we must continually be relying on and responding to Christ’s grace and mercy. When we do that, then we can begin to show mercy to others even those who we think we never could. We begin to take initiative and offer the mercy of Jesus Christ to anyone and everyone. God wants to us you to bring mercy to this hurting world.