

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 22, 2023)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Stunning Priorities of Jesus' Kingdom
(*Studies in the Gospel of Luke*)

The Love of the Forgiven

(Luke 7:36-50)

Study #3

Introduction: After the failure...

If you are the coach, what do you do with your starting center, Roy Riegels, when the second half rolls around in the Rose Bowl game, January 1, 1929, after what happened in the first half?

During the first half of the game, Reigels had recovered a fumble for his team, the University of California.¹

Unfortunately, Roy got turned around and ran 65 yards as fast as he could - the wrong way. He was finally tackled by one of his own teammates. So, thankfully, he didn't score against his own team.

But, stuck deep in their own territory, the UC Golden Bears were forced to punt. Their opponent, Georgia Tech, blocked that punt and scored a safety.

The Bears were demoralized, and it was a very quiet dressing room between halves. And Coach Price had a tough decision to make.

What do you do with a player:
Who has failed spectacularly?
Whose failure has brought humiliation to the university?

¹ Berkeley, in those days it was just the University of California.

Who has possibly lost the game by turning the momentum so completely toward the opponent?²

At the end, I'll tell you what Coach Price did with Roy "Wrong Way" Riegels. In the meantime, we're going to focus on Jesus.

Review...

Last Sunday, we saw that Jesus invites us into a life marked by change. Rejecting the *status quo* is to be the *status quo* for the Jesus follower. Highlighting this idea were the last two incidents we saw.

In one, Jesus allowed His disciples to eat grain in a field on the Sabbath AND in the other He healed a man with a withered hand in a Jewish synagogue, also on the Sabbath.

Both of these actions violated the Pharisees' add-on restrictions to God's command to not work on the Sabbath.

In these, and in lots of other ways, Jesus introduced change.

And then, the Lord entered a new phase of His ministry. He chose a few, select disciples whom He called "apostles" ("sent ones") and then invested deeply in them.

- *The Choosing of the Twelve Apostles (6:12-16)*

Jesus spent the entire night in prayer before He made His selection. When day dawned, He called all the disciples together and called out the Twelve.

[Luke 6:14] Simon, whom He also named Peter, and his brother Andrew; and James and John; and Philip and Bartholomew; [15] and Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot; [16] Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

² Riegels' error did turn out to be the difference. Georgia Tech beat UC, 8 to 7.

- *The Sermon on the Level Place (6:17-49)*

After choosing the apostles, Jesus came down from the mountain on which they had gathered to stand on a level place.

On this broad plain, the Lord gave a sermon, a message with many similarities to the Sermon on the Mount which we find in Matthew 5-7.³

Here, speaking to the apostles, to other disciples, and to needy multitudes, Jesus blessed those who were poor, hungry, weeping and hated by men for His sake, AND pronounced woes on those who were rich, well-fed, happy, and well-spoken of by all.

He urged His listeners to embrace radical love, to pursue justice and mercy, to avoid judgmentalism, and to be generous. (vv. 27-38) He finished the sermon with a call to people to not only hear His words, but to build their lives upon them. (vv. 46-49)

Then, there were two miracles.

- *Two Miracles in Two Cities (7:1-17)*

First, He healed the slave of a centurion in Capernaum. (7:1-10) This Roman military officer understood that Jesus had *“command authority.”*

So, when Jesus started to walk to the man’s home, he told Jesus that there was no need to come to his house to heal his slave, because he knew that Jesus could heal from a distance. Well, Jesus did heal - and He marveled at the centurion’s great faith.

A little bit later, He went to a little city called Nain. There, He saw a funeral procession for a widow’s only son. Moved with great compassion, Jesus touched the coffin and brought the young man back to life.

³ Many Bible students believe that these are two recountings of the same sermon. Or (as I prefer to think) it may be that Jesus gave numerous messages that were similar in style and content of which we have two, here and in Matthew 5-7.

- *The Life and Ministry of John the Baptist, A Reprise (7:18-35)*

Then, Jesus answered a question John the Baptist (who was in prison) had sent his own disciples to ask: *“Are You the Messiah?”*

Jesus assured John’s followers that He was, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah. He recounted His own miracles as testimony to that fact and went on to praise John as a prophet.

Following this conversation, Luke records another narrative, which will be our focus today.

The whole scene revolves around the theme of forgiveness. So, before we move into the text, let’s first think a bit about forgiveness.

Forgiveness - In Black And White

From the Dictionary

Here’s what Webster’s dictionary says. Forgiveness means: *to give up a claim to repayment from an offender; to pardon; as, to forgive one’s enemies, or to forgive a debt.*

So, let’s say you have taken out a loan for a car from Red McCombs Ford. Your bright, shiny new 2023 Mustang Mach E is sitting in the driveway at home.

You’re sitting at your couch when you get a call. It’s the salesman who sold you the car a few months ago. He asks how you are enjoying your new Ford. And then, after a couple of minutes, he gets around to the point of the call.

“Mr. _____, the reason I have called is to announce a new policy at this dealership. Mr. McCombs has decided that once a month, he is going to burn the payment book for a San Antonio car purchaser. And, can you believe it, this month - you are it!”

If you ever get that call, you could say that Red “forgave” you the debt that you owed him.

Forgiveness means to not require repayment of a debt of some kind. It's to clear the slate. And, when we use the word "forgive" to describe what God has done for us, that is exactly what we mean.

What happens when God forgives us our sin is that He no longer deals with us as our sins would require. No punishment. No condemnation. The slate is wiped clean.

And we can dig a little deeper into forgiveness.

The root meaning of the word is, "someone giving someone something." And sometimes that root meaning surfaces in the Bible.

From the Bible

For instance, when Jesus gave blind people the ability to see, Luke tells us (Luke 7:21) that He "**granted**" sight to them.

But "**Granted**" is the word we translate in other places, "**forgive**" (Greek, "χαρίζομαι").⁴ Jesus freely gave the blind their sight.

In other words, to forgive is to give something to someone with no strings attached, for no price, with no expectation of payback and with no obligation.

All this is to say that when someone is forgiven, they are freely given something very precious. Pardon. Grace. Mercy.

Jesus' death on the cross is the basis for God's forgiving work. When I believe in Jesus, He forgives every sin I committed before trusting Him and He forgives every sin I will commit after.

He forgives every evil thought, word, or deed, every act of discrimination and bigotry, every biting accusation I have known to be

⁴ Likewise, when the Apostle Paul says that believers have been given spiritual blessings and gifts by God, or that God will freely give us all things through Christ, the word we translate "**freely give**" is elsewhere translated "**forgive**." (Romans 8:32; 1 Corinthians 2:12).

false or unloving, every instance of lust, every immoral, illegal, or unethical deed. They are all covered by His sacrifice.

THAT is what forgiveness means and THAT is what Jesus did when He came to be **[John 1:29] the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.**

It is important that we understand the concept of forgiveness. But we are called to more than understanding. God wants more for us than that we can define forgiveness.

He wants forgiveness to travel from our heads to our hearts. He wants us to be MOVED to overwhelming gratitude at the core of our being for the grace that has been lavished on us.

And, to allow the Lord to touch each of us that deeply, we're going to watch Jesus at work in His capacity as Forgiver.

We catch up to Him while He was eating dinner in the home of a Pharisee named Simon.

Forgiveness - In Living Color!

Making a Scene at Dinner (v. 36-39)

Jesus' arrival (v. 36)

[Luke 7:36a] Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to eat with him... - and I immediately have questions.

Why in the world would a Pharisee invite Jesus to dine with him?
Was there something about Jesus that piqued Simon's curiosity?
Was this Pharisee looking for an opportunity to trip Jesus up?

And...why in the world did Jesus say "Yes"?

[Luke 7:36b]...and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

So, yes, Jesus said "Yes." That proves that He is a Friend of sinners. All sinners. Tax collectors and other notorious sinners (see

Luke 5:29) AND self-righteous legalists. Jesus was and is an equal opportunity Savior of sinners of all stripes.

We learn late in the story (v. 49) that others were present at this dinner, but we don't know how many others were there and they aren't mentioned here. We never find out if Jesus' disciples were there.

The focus is on Jesus and Simon the Pharisee. Both of them would have been resting an elbow on a large cushion, reclining, in front of a short table, eating together.

As they were dining, a woman entered the room. And not just any woman. This woman was known. Her reputation preceded her.

A woman's arrival - and her actions (vv. 37-38)

[37] And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner...

In the language of first century Jewish culture, to refer to a woman as "**a sinner**" implied that she was sexually immoral.

Bible scholars are divided as to whether she was a prostitute or not, but it is possible. It is also possible that she was simply known for her lax morals.

Anyway, this woman had discovered through the city's gossip grapevine that Jesus was eating at Simon's home.

And it is clear from what follows that this woman knew something about Jesus. She may have heard His teaching. They may have spoken with each other.

There is a lot we don't know. But we do know that she went to the home of Simon the Pharisee because she was aware of Jesus and His ways - and she went to do something.

[37]...she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, [38] and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and she wiped them with the hair of her head, and began kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume.

This is extreme behavior. We read this and understand that these acts are prompted by deep, powerful emotions.

Imagine you are there. Your senses are taking it all in. You hear her weeping, see her tears, smell the perfume.

Imagine something like this taking place at the next formal banquet you attend. Pretty disruptive, right? We can only imagine the thoughts rolling around in the minds of the guests.

And we don't have to imagine what thoughts Simon has. Luke tells us.

Simon's internal response (v. 39)

[39] 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!"

So, Simon was thinking that when he invited Jesus to his house for this dinner party, he was inviting a prophet.

Now he knows that Jesus was NOT a prophet precisely because prophets would know what kind of a person this woman was.

And Jesus obviously didn't know who she was because if He had known He wouldn't have had anything to do with her because prophets / holy people don't have anything to do with sinners.

That was his thinking.

Little did Simon know that Jesus knew exactly what kind of a woman she was. He also knew exactly what kind of a man Simon was.

And that was what led Him to tell a short a parable that we often call, "*The Parable of The Two Debtors.*"

A Middle-of-Dinner Story (vv. 40-43)

[40] And Jesus responded⁵ and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he replied, “Say it, Teacher.”⁶

Jesus set up a story by laying out a scene from ordinary life. His parables were always taken from ordinary life.

The characters in this parable are one man who worked for a collection agency and two men who have allowed themselves to get into trouble with debt.

What with inflation and the holiday season just past, we understand how this could happen. These two guys overspent. Now they each have hefty balances on their VISA cards.

It is now time to face the music.

[41] “A moneylender had two debtors: the one owed five hundred denarii, and the other, fifty.”⁷

In today’s buying power, the one man has a debt of about \$6,000. The other one owed closer to \$60,000.

Neither of them had the means to repay, leaving them no recourse but to throw themselves on the mercy of VISA (a very scary thing to have to do).

As Jesus continued with the story, though, the plot took an unexpected turn. In response to their hard-luck story, the collection agent turned out to be a soft touch.

[42a] “When they were unable to repay, he cancelled (literally, “forgave”) the debts of both.”

Jesus follows up this story with a question to Simon, His host.

[42b] “So which of them (the debtors) will love him (the moneylender) more?”

Simon answered, **[43]...“I assume the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.” And He said to him, ‘You have judged correctly.’**

Now, that could have been the end of the conversation, with the Pharisee scoring a win for a correct answer. But Jesus kept things going. Let’s listen.

The Fruit and Root of Forgiveness (vv. 44-50)

Forgiveness invites spontaneous extravagance (vv. 44-46)

[44] And 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.”

Sure, Simon noticed Jesus’ dirty feet. He just didn’t think it was his job to do anything about it. Let somebody else do it. But this woman couldn’t stand the thought of Jesus having soiled feet, so she washed them with the only towel available - her hair.

[45] “You gave Me no kiss; but she has not stopped kissing My feet since the time I came in.”

Simon wasn’t concerned to give Jesus the usual, hospitable kiss of greeting. But the woman, not believing that she was worthy to kiss His head, was satisfied kissing His feet.

[46] “You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume.”

Simon wasn’t going to waste his precious anointing oil on Jesus’ head, as was customary. But the woman was so concerned to honor Jesus that she spilled a whole bottle of perfume all over His feet.

⁵ Jesus responded to the man’s THOUGHTS. How disconcerting would it be for Jesus to give a verbal answer to your thoughts?

⁶ For Simon to call Jesus “Teacher” was quite polite and respectful.

⁷ A denarius was roughly the equivalent of the wages of a laborer for a day.

All that she did for Jesus were things that should have been done for Him by Simon or by someone in his home.

This woman? She hadn't even been invited to the dinner party; she wouldn't have been welcomed at the party; she had no business being at Simon's home. And she sure hadn't been asked to serve Jesus.

But her heart was stirred. She was prompted by something internal to take it upon herself to do these things. She took initiative.

What she did for Jesus was done to a degree that was way out of line with the norm. Wipe His feet with her hair? Anoint His feet with a whole bottle of perfume? Kiss His feet?

Her service was extravagant. And her actions are perfectly explained by *The Parable of The Two Debtors*.

The parable tells us that when anyone grasps the enormity of what they've been forgiven, something within them will call forth an initiative of spontaneous, extravagant love.

Like the debtor who owed five hundred denarii, this woman knew that Jesus had forgiven her a great debt that she could have never repaid. So, she loved much.

And Jesus' final words to Simon highlight one more by-product of appreciating the forgiveness she had and that we have in Jesus.

Forgiveness invites love for the Forgiver (vv. 47-50)

Forgiveness before love (vv. 47-48)

[47] "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but the one who is forgiven little, loves little." [48] And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven."⁸

⁸ I. Howard Marshall (a very good Bible scholar) translates, "Because of this conduct I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven, as is evidenced by the fact

What we have here is not an impossible "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" dilemma. We don't have to wonder, "Which came first, the woman's love or her forgiveness?"

We know which came first. She was *first* forgiven and *then* she loved. She loved Jesus because she had been forgiven by Jesus. That is the whole point of what Jesus says to Simon and it was the only point of the parable.

No, we don't know exactly when she was forgiven; only that it was at some point prior to the dinner party. She was forgiven before she anointed Jesus, washed His feet with her hair, and kissed His feet.

As Jesus tells us, we know that her sins had already been forgiven because she loved Him with such abandon.⁹

And what about the ending of this scene, where, for the first time, we are made aware of other guests?

Faith before forgiveness (vv. 49-50)

[49] And those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?"

They were offended that Jesus dared to declare someone forgiven. And they were as negative and as private in their thoughts about Jesus as Simon had been.

But the Lord's final words to the woman ignore the guests' thoughts and are directed, again, to the forgiven woman.

that she loved much." Forgiveness (and therefore, faith) came before this dinner party's acts of devotion.

⁹ Leon Morris (a very good Bible scholar) is clear and to the point when he says, "We must understand carefully the words '*for she loved much.*' Jesus is not saying that the woman's actions had earned forgiveness, nor even that her love had merited it. In line with His little parable and His later words (v. 50), He is saying that her love is proof that she had already been forgiven. Her love was her response to God's grace. The Jerusalem Bible renders it well with, '*her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her, or she would not have shown such great love.*'"

[50] And He said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Remember, she had lived badly. She was, as Luke told us and as everyone knew, a ***“sinful woman.”***

At some point prior to this dinner, she had some sort of interaction with Jesus that told her that He was worthy of her trust. She put her faith in Jesus, which saved her and gave her the forgiveness she needed.¹⁰

So...great need gave way to faith which brought great grace and forgiveness, which produced great love.

The root of forgiveness is faith. The fruit of forgiveness is love.

Conclusion:

So, what happened after Roy “Wrong Way” Riegels nearly scored for the other team in the first half of the 1929 Rose Bowl?

Riegels was so upset with himself after running the wrong way that he resisted going back into the game when the coach told him to.

He told Coach Price, *“I can’t do it. I’ve ruined you. I’ve ruined myself. I’ve ruined the University of California. I couldn’t face that crowd to save my life.”*

The coach responded, *“Roy, get up and go back out there - the game is only half over.”*

And Riegels played. He turned in a stellar second half performance, including blocking a Georgia Tech punt. He played football again the next year, too, becoming the University of California’s team captain and earning All-American honors.

Roy made quite a comeback. Even today, storytellers will retell this story, a century after it happened, to highlight Roy’s Riegel’s courage to pick himself up and get back in the game after his failure.

For me, as impressive as Reigels’ play in the second half was, even more impressive is the coach’s decision to play him, again.

Coach Price took a huge gamble when he put Riegels back in the game. Would he fail again? Would he crack under pressure? Would he do even more damage?

The coach made a courageous “grace call” that day. He put his own reputation and job on the line when he played the player who failed. And Roy Riegels, having received grace / forgiveness played his heart out.

That’s what people do who understand that they have been forgiven a great debt or a great failure or a great sin.

I’m grateful to God that He saved my soul and gave me eternal life when I believed in Jesus. That was during my high school years.

I’m also grateful to God that when He saved me, that was only the beginning of His on-going work of transforming me, which is a work that continues to this day.

If you had asked me on the day that I came to faith, I would have told you that Jesus forgave me of my sins. I would have agreed that my sins were bad. And I was grateful.

But to be honest, I didn’t see my sins as THAT bad. I knew people who had done far worse things than what I had done.

So, while I was glad for my forgiveness, I wasn’t bowled over by it. You might say that I was mildly appreciative for my forgiveness.

Then, a few years after becoming a Christian, while I was serving as a pastor here, the Lord took me through a season when He awakened me to some of the reality and the depth of my own sin.

¹⁰ The Greek verb form of ***“has saved”*** (*seswken*) is in the perfect tense, indicating a past event which has present and on-going effects.

I was prompted to explore the workings of sin in my life. The deeper I dug, the more ugliness I found.

I was struck by the enormity of my specific sinfulness - consisting of seeking security in people and things other than God (idolatry); wanting what was off-limits to me (lust); pathological addiction to pleasing people, and more.

Seeing all of that wiped away my mild appreciation for forgiveness and replaced it with an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the beauty of grace.

That was a watershed season for me, and Jesus has blessed me with dozens of those “aha” watershed moments since.

On my best days, I see myself standing with this woman, overwhelmed with gratitude for what Jesus did for me.

Coach Price ran a risk when He played Roy Riegels in the second half of the 1929 Rose Bowl - and his gamble played off. He didn't pay much of a price for his “grace call.”

Jesus, on the other hand, lost standing with the powerful of His day when He ate with tax collectors. His nickname, “*Friend of sinners*” was not a compliment. His reputation suffered for His associations with sinful women and men. And He was eventually put to death for siding with the least, the last, and the lost.

His priorities run counter cultural. He forgives those most in need of it, knowing that they will be most grateful.

He puts people back into the game who have failed, who have run the wrong way, who have even brought a measure of shame to His Name, who have shot themselves or others in the foot.

God has made an ages-long career out of putting wrecks back together and back on the road. He puts injured players back on the field who play their hearts out while playing with a limp.

That's us. We are His trophies of grace.

God has forgiven you a great debt of sin by the sacrifice of Jesus on a Roman cross. He has given you a fresh start. He will give you a fresh start today.

Out of gratitude to Him, serve with your whole heart the One who gave His all for you.