

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(February 16, 2025)

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: Sharpening Discipleship's Focus

(Learning from the Gospel of Luke)

#### **Loving God**

(or "The beautiful love of the greatly forgiven")

(Luke 7:36-50; 6:27-36)

Study #6

#### **Introduction: The greatest of these...**

We've got love on our minds these days, and it's not just because of Valentine's Day.

Those of us who have been a part of the Next Steps meetings over the past few Thursday evenings have been wrestling with Jesus' call to become the loving men and women He saved us to be.

But whether you've been up here on Thursdays or not, we all wrestle with this.

All of us here today want to grow in our capacity to love because Jesus said that loving God and others was the most important thing to do.

He identified the greatest command God ever gave as the command to love God and others. (Luke 10:27) He also told His disciples that everyone would know that we ARE His disciples by the way that we who follow Him love each other. (John 13:34-35)

We know that the Apostle John "got" this. In his first letter, John tells us that we are to love because God Himself IS love. (1 John 4:7-11) It's that fundamental.

The Apostle Paul "got it," too. He wrote that of the three most important Christian graces - faith, hope, and love - the greatest is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

So, the defining mark of the mature disciple of Jesus is love. Love is the high-water mark of discipleship.

So, in a series of messages exploring what discipleship is all about, it is inevitable that we would come to the theme of love. That's what this morning's message is all about.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the sermon.

If you have looked at the program this morning, you'll see that the sermon title is, "**Love God...Love Enemies.**"

You'll also see that the outline in your program today is an outline of two passages. One of these passages tells the story of someone who REALLY loved God / Jesus. The other passage is teaching from Jesus about loving enemies.

My plan for this morning was to give a message from both passages about both themes...until it wasn't.

What happened was that early on Saturday morning - yes, I know that's pretty late in the week - it became clear to me that I would not do justice to either passage if I tried to cover both. So, I changed course.

I put on hold the theme of loving enemies for next Sunday to let us give full attention this morning to the theme of loving God.

Even with that change, we could spend months learning what it means to love God with our "**heart, soul, mind, and strength.**"

My plan, now, though (and as you just learned, I'm learning to hold my plans with a loose grip), is to give our undivided attention to one of the most moving stories in the gospels of someone who REALLY loved God / Jesus.

I'm developing all of our studies in discipleship from the Gospel of Luke.

And Luke, in some ways more than the other Gospel writers, highlights Jesus' dealings with the least, the last, and the lost; with outsiders; with people who have sinned - and greatly.

The person who serves as our model for loving God today - she is a woman - was one of those.

Luke leads us into our passage with a section that has Jesus talking to a crowd about His cousin, John the Baptist.

Jesus praised John for being God's spokesman and for being the one who had prepared the way for His own ministry. The last things Jesus had to say to this crowd was a rebuke for not responding to either the ministry of John not to His own.

Jesus said, **[Luke 7:33] "For John the Baptist has come neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon!' [34] The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a heavy drinker, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' [35] And yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children."**

That was a perfect lead in to our story for today. Ironically, the action takes place in the home of a Pharisee (a very together person) where there was a meal / banquet), probably thrown in Jesus' honor.

### **Jesus, Anointed (Luke 7:37-39)**

#### **Jesus, In the Home of Simon, a Pharisee (v. 36)**

**[36] Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to eat with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.**

This episode happened at an early stage in Jesus' ministry. And at this point, the Pharisees didn't "get" Jesus. They were confused by His claims and His miracles and by the company He kept. So, they studied Him.

This Pharisee - we learn that his name is Simon - wanted to find out more about Jesus and figured that the best way to do that was to have Him and a few of his fellow Pharisees over for a meal.

I don't think that Simon was out to destroy Jesus or even to trap Him. I think Simon was honestly curious.

Luke doesn't tell us anything about the setting for this meal or in what city it was being held. It was, we can assume, a nice, polite, orderly gathering.

There would have been a low-slung table filled with food. All of those at the banquet would have been reclining around it.<sup>1</sup>

At these banquets hosted by well-known people like Simon, the doors were left open so that people from the city could come inside, not to eat, but to listen to the conversations of the rabbis.

I'd call Jesus' willingness to accept Simon's invitation, bold. He knew that Simon and his Pharisee buddies would soon be dangerous. He knew He was taking a risk, but He said, "Yes," anyway.

As risky as Jesus' "Yes" was, it was nowhere near as risky as was another person's willingness to walk through that home's front door.<sup>2</sup>

### **Jesus, Anointed By a Sinful Woman (vv. 37-38)**

*The identification of the woman (v. 37a)*

**[37a] And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner...<sup>3</sup>**

This woman had a bad reputation. It is usually assumed that her reputation was for immorality. The text doesn't say that.

<sup>1</sup> From one source, it seems that at these more formal banquets the guests "reclined" while informal meals were held with family members seated on chairs.

<sup>2</sup> See also 11:37; 14:1 for times when Jesus dined with Pharisees. Each time, He rebuked the hosts for something they did.

<sup>3</sup> We are not told whether she had changed her life already. Perhaps she had and yet still had the reputation of a sinner. That does happen...

Some believe that, though unnamed, she was Mary Magdalene, or that she was a prostitute. The text doesn't say that, either.

The Bible intentionally leaves her unnamed, unidentified. All we know is that had somehow gained a reputation as a *“sinner.”*<sup>4</sup>

For her to enter the home of a religious leader like Simon, the Pharisee, took guts.

The Pharisees didn't have the same mindset Jesus did when it came to hanging with sinful people. But she was highly motivated to be where Jesus was, so she went.

*Her intent (v. 37b)*

***[37b]...and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume...***

It is clear to us that she had already heard about Jesus. How much she knew about Jesus will become clear as the story progresses.

When word got out that Jesus was at Simon's home, she made plans to go there. She went equipped with an action plan.

Her plan involved using that very expensive, very fragrant perfume<sup>5</sup> she had brought that was stored in the pricy alabaster flask.

We'll watch as this woman anointed Jesus with the perfume.

This anointing we're about to see is one of two times that the Gospel writers tell us about a woman anointing Jesus.

The other anointing took place in the home of a man who had leprosy, also named Simon. It was in the village of Bethany. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, was the one who anointed Jesus there.

<sup>4</sup> Luke mentions “sinners” frequently. See Luke 5:8, 30, 32; 6:32-34; 7:34, 37, 39; 13:2; 15:1-2, 7, 10; 18:13; 19:7; 24:7. (hamartolos; Greek: *amartolos*)

<sup>5</sup> The woman brought myrrh, not the inexpensive olive oil that was usually used for anointing.

That event occurred during the last week of Jesus' life, six days before the Jewish Passover.<sup>6</sup> That anointing is not this anointing.

Here is the anointing.

*Her shocking action (v. 38)*

***[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.***

Jesus' sandals would have already been removed, as was the custom inside of a home. And His feet would have been pointing away from the low banquet table.

This woman (she is never named; she never speaks) approached the table and began the anointing.

Everything she did was intentional, well thought out - and done with deep emotion. Each step - wiping His feet, kissing His feet,<sup>7</sup> anointing His feet - was done by tears.

It's easy to see that she was expressing deep love for Jesus by this extraordinary act.

It is also easy to imagine that what she did changed the whole temperature in the room. It was no longer the site of a polite semi-formal banquet to get to know more about Jesus.

Now, it's chaotic. Messy. Disordered and disrupted.

While what she did didn't break any biblical laws or standards, what she did no doubt violated first-century customs.

<sup>6</sup> We read about that anointing in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and in John 12. Darrell Bock argues convincingly that the anointing recorded here in Luke is a separate anointing from the one recorded by Matthew, Mark, and John.

<sup>7</sup> “**Kiss**” - the same word that was used to describe the kiss that the prodigal's father gave when the wayward son returned home. (Luke 15:20)

What she did wasn't actually immodest. But for a woman to kiss a man's feet and to wipe those feet with her unwrapped hair would have been considered immodest.

Certainly, it was out of order and unexpected. Simon, the Pharisee, thought the act violated propriety. He took great offense.

### **Simon's Dismissive 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!"***

When Jesus sat still and didn't seem to object to the anointing, Simon doubted the stories about Jesus being something special.

He knew that if Jesus knew about this woman, He sure wouldn't have let her touch Him. He knew that Jesus wouldn't have had anything to do with her if He knew.

But Jesus knew more than Simon thought He knew. For one thing, He knew Simon's unspoken thoughts - and addressed them.<sup>8</sup>

### **Jesus, to Simon (vv. 40-47)**

#### **Rebuked By a Parable (vv. 40-43)**

*Simon invited Jesus to speak (v. 40)*

***[40] And Jesus responded and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher."<sup>9</sup>***

What Jesus went on to say in a short, clever parable proved that He knew all about Simon AND ***"who and what sort of person this woman [was]."***

### **The Parable of The Two Debtors (vv. 41-42a)**

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

Just to get a sense of scale here, one debtor has ten times the debt of the other. It's the difference between owing the \$30,000 on a car loan and a Visa credit card with a \$3,000 balance.

We can scale down a bit. A denarius was about equal to a day's wages for a common laborer.

So, a better comparison might be that one debtor owed the moneylender a couple of month's wages while the other owed a year and a half's wages.

But then, the twist. By an act of sheer grace from the loan officer, both debtors were forgiven their debt - in full.<sup>10</sup>

***[42a] When they were unable to repay, he canceled the debts of both.***

It was an extraordinary, unexpected, counter-intuitive act from a man who made his living by people paying back their loans.

Jesus' *"Gotcha!"* question to Simon follows.

***[42b] "So which of them will love him more?"***

Simons answered, and I applaud him for answering. Often, Jesus' opponents refused to answer His questions at all knowing that their answer would trap them in their own web.

His answer, given grudgingly, was correct.

***[43a] Simon answered and said, "I assume<sup>11</sup> the one for whom he canceled the greater debt."***

<sup>8</sup> On Jesus knowing people's thoughts, see Luke 5:20, 22; 6:8; 9:47; 11:17; 20:23.

<sup>9</sup> Simon called Jesus, ***"Teacher"*** - a term of respect. Not of reverence.

<sup>10</sup> *Xarizomai* = forgive a debt = the gift of God's grace in Jesus.

<sup>11</sup> ***"I assume"*** - Simon knew what this parable said about him. (so, Marshall)

To which Jesus replied, **[53b]...“You have judged correctly.”**

The larger the debt that is forgiven, the more love<sup>12</sup> will be felt and shown.<sup>13</sup>

The lesson of the parable revealed two things. Secondly, Simon’s lovelessness. Primarily, the woman’s over-the-top love.

### **Rebuked By An Example (vv. 44-47)**

*The woman and Simon, a study in contrast (vv. 44-46)*

**[44a] And turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?”**

This was not a pointless question, because, to this point, Simon had not really “seen” her.

She was a nameless woman who entered his home while he was hosting a banquet. Then, she was the nameless sinner who did something that he saw as wildly inappropriate.

Jesus wanted Simon to look at her, to see the woman. And as He spoke to Simon, Jesus continued looking at the woman.

**[44b] “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.”**

Simon didn’t provide the common courtesy of foot-washing for Jesus. So, the woman took care of it - by the tears (literally) “raining”<sup>14</sup> from her eyes.

<sup>12</sup> Greek “agape” (αγαπη) - refers to an unconditional love.

<sup>13</sup> Each element in the parable stands for something. This parable really does walk on all fours. The moneylender points to God. The debt is sin. The debtors are forgiven sinners.

<sup>14</sup> Tears shed = βρεξω (Greek) = rain showers.

I suspect that she was weeping at the joy of being with Jesus, remorse over past sins, exuberance over being able to honor Jesus.

The friendly, social kiss of greeting was another common courtesy which the Pharisee had not given Jesus.

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

Her kiss wasn’t the kiss of friendship. It was a kiss of humility, gratitude, and reverence.

Simon could have, he might have, maybe he should have, anointed Jesus’ head with olive oil when He arrived. But he didn’t.

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

Making up for Simon’s lack, the woman gave an anointing with a very expensive perfume.

Here’s Jesus’ punchline.

*Great forgiveness prompts great love (v. 47)*

**[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.”**

To understand this verse, chronology is everything.

You can tell that she had been forgiven much because she loved so much. By that, you and I understand that she was a forgiven woman when she walked into Simon’s house.<sup>15</sup>

She lovingly anointed and kissed Jesus’ feet BECAUSE she had been forgiven.

<sup>15</sup> It is to misread this story to say that she was forgiven because she anointed Jesus. It’s the other way around. Her anointing was prompted by the love she had for Jesus because of the gift of forgiven sin.

So, this is one of those places in the Bible where we are invited to imagine a backstory, a prequel to this scene.

Because of what happens here, we can assume that at some point prior to this meeting in Simon's home, this woman had either met Jesus, heard Jesus, or heard enough about Jesus to believe in Him.

She, knowing about herself what everybody else knew (that she was a sinner), received forgiveness from Jesus.

Being forgiven, she was so overwhelmed with gratitude to Jesus that when she heard that He was in Simon's home, she made a beeline to get there and pour out her extravagant love on Him in the form of this anointing.

And what can we say about Simon?

Well, the story isn't really about him. But if I was going to say something about him, it would be that he viewed himself as someone for whom sin wasn't such a big deal.

Of course, he knew that he had sinned, but "just a little bit." He didn't need forgiveness all that much. And for that reason, though unstated in the passage, didn't express much in the way of love for Jesus / God.

The episode comes to a close as Jesus spoke the already-given gift of forgiveness out loud.

**Jesus, to the Woman (vv. 48-50)**

**Jesus Declared Forgiveness (v. 48)**

*[48] And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven."<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> There is no real difference in what Jesus said to this woman and what He said to the paralyzed man. (Luke 5:20 The Greek grammar (perfect tense verb) in both stories implies that they were already forgiven. Jesus made a declaration of what was true. In both cases, He had already forgiven their sins.

This confirmation of her forgiveness would have been music to the woman's ears, especially in light of the rejection she had received from the Pharisees.

But Simon and his friends were appalled.

**The Pharisaic Dinner Guests Were Shocked (v. 49)**

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

Simon had been curious about Jesus, so he invited Him over for a meal. He and his friends were troubled by what they learned about Jesus when He allowed a sinful woman to touch Him, to anoint Him.

Now they know that He was either a man / Man commissioned by God OR He is deluded, presumptuous, even blasphemous. There could be no middle ground.<sup>17</sup>

But this time, Jesus ignored their concerns, did not speak to their thoughts, and spoke a redemptive word to the woman.

**Jesus Confirmed Her Salvation (v. 50)**

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

Of course, it was her faith that saved her. It is always faith that saves us and brings God's gift of eternal life. And it was receiving that great grace that prompted her great love for Jesus.

**Conclusion: Our love for God...**

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<sup>17</sup> The Pharisees in attendance were discussing among themselves the identify of Jesus. Verbally, or internally, it is not clear.

On the whole, it's much safer to think about God's love for us than to think about our love for God. But love for God is the theme of the text we've just seen, so we'll end by considering that.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is that we would love the LORD with heart, soul, mind, and strength.<sup>18</sup>

Heartfelt, passionate, over-the-top love for God is what we're after. And, in a moment of quiet reflection, many of us will have to admit that it's what we're most often missing.

Yes, loving God involves obedience to God's commands. (John 14:15) But it is not a grudging obedience. It's an eager, enthusiastic, willing obedience. For me to love God means that I'm all in to obey God even when that obedience is to something challenging.

Loving God is about worship. But it's about more than going to a worship service. It's about worshipping God with extreme devotion.

Loving God looks like what the unnamed woman did at the banquet held in Jesus' honor. It looks nothing like the response Simon the Pharisee gave to Jesus.

Now, according to the parable Jesus told, what was the difference between the woman and Simon?

***[47]...“her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but the one who is forgiven little, loves little.”***

The woman - *“a sinner”* - knew full well the enormity of her sins, understood the gravity of her moral deficit before God, and *“got”* that she owed a debt she could never repay. So, her love overflowed for the One who paid that debt.

Simon's story was different.

It wasn't that Simon's sin was *“little.”* His sin was every bit as serious as the sin of the woman. The problem was that he didn't appreciate the enormity of his sin.

He measured himself against a moral code that he dreamed up and figured that he was doing just fine. He tithed and fasted and went to public worship and prayed (sorta).

As he saw it, God didn't have to forgive him of much. So, he loved little.

If Simon had just looked beneath his *“together”* exterior to his internal life, he would have seen that he - like other Pharisees - had neglected justice and mercy and faithfulness.<sup>19</sup>

Then, he would have seen the depth of his sin and then he would have seen how much God had forgiven him and then he, too, would have loved much.

This story is, for me, both autobiographical and aspirational, because I know what it is to be *“Simon.”*

In fact, for quite some time after having believed in Jesus, I will admit that I was *“mildly appreciative”* for what Jesus did for me on the cross.

Oh, I was aware of a few sins in my life, many of which I had mostly dealt with. But I was mostly comfortable that I no longer had much in the way of sin issues in my life.

The watershed season in my life and the season when I first remember being overwhelmed with gratitude for what Jesus did for me on the cross was that season when God opened my eyes to see the ongoing enormity of my sin, the continuing gravity of my moral deficit before God, and the debt that I owed Jesus that I could never repay.

I will admit to still reverting to being a Simon from time to time.

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<sup>18</sup> Originally given in Deuteronomy 6:5, repeated here and at Matthew 22:37-40 and Mark 12:28-31.

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<sup>19</sup> Jesus said that the Pharisees were guilty of these sins: Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42.

Theologically correct, doctrinally on point, but missing that all important passion for Jesus that comes from recognizing the enormity of my sin which made necessary the horror of Jesus' death for me.

My aim is to be like this sinful woman who understood what Jesus had done for her, was undone by that, and expressed her love for Jesus in extravagant worship.