

1. The issue of forgiveness

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Good evening, friends. We turn now to our Bible reading, and this is taken from Luke's Gospel, chapter 7. And if you'd like to follow in our big hardback Bibles, you'll find this on page 864.

Page 864, Luke chapter 7. And I'm going to read from verse 36 down to chapter 8, verse 3.

So Luke chapter 7, verse 36. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.

And Jesus, answering him, said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, Say it, teacher.

A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed 500 denarii and the other 50. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both.

[1 : 52] Now, which of them will love him more? Simon answered, The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt. And he said to him, You have judged rightly.

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.

You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.

And he said to her, Your sins are forgiven. Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins?

[2 : 59] And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Soon afterward, he went on through cities and villages, Proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

And the twelve were with him. And also some women, who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out.

And Joanna, the wife of Chusa, Herod's household manager. And Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

Well, this is the word of the Lord. Amen. And may it be a blessing to us this evening. Well, you might like to open your Bibles at Luke chapter 7, page 864. I don't want to turn to this passage quite yet, because I'd first like to take a few moments to introduce this new series of sermons.

I think I've got five Sunday evenings, God willing, coming up. And I want to give to this series of sermons the title, Storming the Citadel, which is, of course, a military idea.

[4 : 09] And let me explain that idea of storming the citadel. The Apostle Paul, in Romans and elsewhere, writes about the obedience of faith. Or sometimes he'll speak of the need for people to obey the gospel.

Now, that is a very arresting phrase, to obey the gospel, because most people will tend to think of believing the gospel. That, too, of course, is very much a New Testament phrase.

And the idea there in believing the gospel is that there are certain things about Jesus which need to be understood and accepted, taken on board. But the Apostle Paul insists that the gospel is not something just to be believed, but also to be obeyed.

In other words, it is not something simply for the mind to grasp. It's also to do with the willing submission of our hearts and lives. So what is involved in becoming a Christian is not only understanding, but surrendering.

There's a natural stubborn rebelliousness in the human heart, which does not want to submit to the Lord. Now, friends, do you know what I'm talking about when I say these things?

[5 : 21] I'm sure you will if you have an atom of self-knowledge. I'd like to read some words written about 25 years ago by James Philip, the father of our minister, Willie. James Philip wrote a very good short commentary on the letter to the Romans.

And in this little quotation, he's writing about Paul's phrase from Romans 1, verse 5, The Obedience of Faith. And Mr. Philip starts with some words of John Calvin, and he then adds a few further words of his own.

Faith, says Calvin, is properly that by which we obey the gospel. And James Philip goes on. This, then, is the central issue of the church's proclamation.

It is the storming of the resistant citadels of men's souls to bring them into submission to the will and mind of Christ.

It is this that constitutes gospel work. I wonder, Willie, if you remember those words written in your father's fine little commentary. In fact, when I first read them a few years ago, I was so struck with that little paragraph, I not only put a big tick in pencil beside it, but a large exclamation mark as well.

[6 : 35] I thought to myself, this is so true and so well expressed. It really is the issue. The gospel is the urgent proclamation of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

And that gospel comes to the human heart as a command from heaven to bow down before the king. So becoming a Christian is not only about believing in Jesus, it's about surrendering to Jesus. If you and I are truly Christians, it means that the resistant citadels of our souls have been stormed. And we have, in the end, run up the white flag of surrender.

We've said to the Lord Jesus, Lord, it is deeply wrong that I should seek to be the captain of my soul any longer. There's only one rightful king of my life, and it's you.

And I gladly bow down before you as my sovereign. Now, that's why I'm calling this little series of sermons Storming the Citadel. We're going to look at a number of incidents in the gospels, I think just in Luke's gospel, actually, where various individuals come up against Jesus and realize that he truly is their king and savior and they're transformed by him.

[7 : 45] And when I use this phrase, storming the citadel, I don't mean to imply that Jesus is a harsh or domineering tyrant who wants to beat us down into submission.

It is not like that at all. His command to surrender is backed by nothing but his love for us. He has our best interests at heart. But I think we'll find in each of the passages that we study that a human heart is gladly surrendering and is saying to the Lord Jesus, come into the citadel of my soul, plant your flag there and take command for you only are my true king.

There can be no other. So let's turn now to this passage in Luke chapter seven, verses 36 to 50.

And let me point out one or two things which I think will help us to understand what was going on on this particular occasion.

It seems that Luke, the evangelist, means us to understand that the Pharisee, Simon, had some knowledge of Jesus before he invited him to dinner. Look at verse 36.

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him. Now, this Pharisee, we discover he's called Simon. He must have been thinking about Jesus for some time.

[9 : 06] Jesus was in Galilee in the north of Israel at this stage, and he was causing a tremendous stir, not least amongst the Pharisees who were the leading Bible scholars of the day and who were very much respected by the ordinary people.

And in chapters five and six in Luke's gospel, there are three or four incidents where the Pharisees get very angry with Jesus because he doesn't seem to stick to their rules.

He won't fit into their framework. And they begin to think of him and talk of him as a blasphemer and a lawbreaker. And yet they cannot help but be impressed by him because his manner and his teaching are so strong and authoritative and his miracles of healing simply cannot be denied.

Now, many of the Pharisees were dead set against Jesus and they would not have invited him to dinner under any circumstances. But this Pharisee, Simon, seems to have been curious.

He may well have heard Jesus teaching in public and he wanted to examine him at closer quarters. And when you look at what Simon says to himself in verse 39, it's clear that he's been wondering if Jesus might indeed be a prophet, as some of the ordinary people were beginning to say.

[10 : 23] So Simon must have known something about him before he invited him. But the woman in the story also must have known something about Jesus before she gate crashed the dinner party.

Look at verse 37 here. And behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment.

So somebody must have said to her, you do know, don't you, that Jesus is in Simon's house having dinner. And when she heard about it, she must have quickly gone to her own house where she had this precious flask of ointment.

She picked it up, knowing what she wanted to do with it. And she hurried off to Simon's house and walked in through the open door. Now, she would not have behaved like that if she had known nothing about Jesus beforehand.

Almost certainly she, too, had heard him speaking in public, perhaps on a number of occasions. And she might even have had a personal and private conversation with him. And what she had discovered about him made her want to go to him on this occasion with her flask of perfume or ointment.

[11:35] Now, at our dinner parties, we sit at table, don't we? Please, would you pass the mustard, Hubert? Thank you so much. Thank you. Straight backs, feet on the floor.

That's the way we behave. But in Israel in those days, you would recline on a couch. I can't quite demonstrate it here, but you'd get up on this couch. You'd put your feet up to one side and partly behind you.

And that's why verse 37 says that Jesus was reclining at the table. I wouldn't very much enjoy eating my good dinner if I had to recline at table. But that's the way they did it in those days. And in those days in Israel, where the weather was generally very nice and warm and there were no burglar alarms and no gated communities, people would often wander straight into other people's houses and join in the conversation at dinner, which I imagine was very nice when the visitors were nice, but rather embarrassing if the visitors were disreputable.

And this woman was disreputable. Luke only tells us here in verse 39 that she was a sinner. He doesn't say any more than that. Maybe she was one of those women who ran a really gruesome, horrible pub in the worst part of the city where fights were breaking out every night.

[12:48] Maybe she was a prostitute. We don't know. And really, it doesn't matter. But clearly, she was well known as the sort of woman that you wouldn't want your sons to get to know too well.

So here they all are. Dinner is in progress. And Luke tells us about the three principal characters involved. Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and this unnamed woman.

So let me point out just two things, two things about the story. First, the gospel divides people. Now, it's a strange fact that over the centuries, many folk have imagined that the Christian gospel will act as a power to unite society. Now, the gospel does wonderfully unite those who come to believe it.

And the fact is that when you become a Christian, you discover a very deep sense of affinity with other Christians, many of whom are very different from you yourself in terms of family or race or color or social background.

[13:53] If you're a Christian, as I know most here are tonight, you've only got to look around this building to see how different you are from so many others here who are also Christians. And yet you know that the Christians are in the sight of God in real terms, your brothers and sisters.

In fact, you belong to them much more closely than you do to members of your own natural family who are not Christians. There's a deep unity between Christians, however different we may be in human terms.

Now, while the gospel unites us to those who believe it, it will always divide us from those who don't. The gospel creates a kind of fault line down the center of the human race, dividing those who belong to Christ from those who don't.

So, for example, a Christian nurse who works in a hospital, she knows how deeply she belongs to others on the hospital staff who are also Christians. And while she may love and very much care about other staff members who are not Christians, she knows that she has a profoundly different outlook on life from those who are not Christians.

Her whole value system is different from theirs. Her whole understanding of history is very different. What divides her from the others is the gospel.

[15:15] In fact, more than that, it is Jesus himself who is the great divider. This nurse who is a Christian loves him and trusts him and acknowledges him as her king and prays to him.

And yet the nurse who is not a Christian doesn't value him and hardly ever thinks about him. Now, this is what we see happening in this story here. Jesus, in effect, forces a wedge between Simon the Pharisee and this unnamed woman.

They react to him so differently. The Jesus who speaks to the Pharisee is exactly the same Jesus as the Jesus who speaks to the woman. In each case, he is the loving, wonderful son of God who has come to the world brimming with love for it.

And yet, look how his conversation with each of these two ends up. Simon ends up annoyed, rebuked and disgruntled. Whereas the woman ends up overjoyed and she goes away from the house knowing that her many sins have been forgiven.

So the same Jesus who produces annoyance and unhappiness in Simon produces joy and relief in the woman. The gospel divides society.

[16:33] The Lord divides society. And you can see this pattern right from the beginning of the Bible. Think, for example, of Cain and Abel, the two oldest sons of Adam and Eve. Each of those two young men approached God with his sacrificial offering.

And the Lord looked favorably on Abel and his offering. But on Cain and his offering, he did not look favorably because he knew Abel's heart and he knew Cain's heart. And Cain went away from the Lord surly and unhappy.

Or think of Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel. Saul was disobedient, persistently disobedient to the Lord and eventually had to be rejected.

Whereas David, despite his real and big flaws, loved the Lord and became the forerunner of Jesus himself. Or think of King Herod and the wise men from the east who came to visit Jesus.

Herod hated Jesus and wanted to do away with him. Whereas the wise men loved him and bowed down to him and worshipped him. So as the gospel comes to the human race, it will always divide us into two groups.

[17:39] And all of us will be found in the end to belong to one group or the other. There is no neutrality. There's no third group. The Bible knows only two groups.

All of us, friends, at the end will be found to belong to one or the other. So in our story here, we have one Jesus, but two consequences of his coming.

Simon does not hear from Jesus that his sins have been forgiven. But the woman hears not only that her sins are forgiven, but she's allowed to go in peace.

And as verse 50 puts it, she is saved. And you can imagine just how happy she was that evening as she went back to her home. So there's the first thing. The gospel divides people.

Jesus and his message divides people. Now, secondly, Jesus interests people.

[18:39] We'd be wrong to think that this sinful woman was interested in Jesus, but that Simon was not interested in Jesus. It's obvious that Simon was very interested in Jesus.

He would never have invited him back to his house if he'd not been. Simon invited him to his home because clearly he'd heard a lot about Jesus and he wanted to see for himself. Simon, like any Pharisee, regarded himself as a religious expert.

He'd heard the rumors about Jesus. He'd heard the claims and counterclaims that were being made about Jesus. How some people were calling him an imposter and a blasphemer.

But others were wondering if he might be a prophet, might even perhaps be the Messiah. So Simon must have said to himself, I want to have a look at him for myself at close quarters.

So both Simon and the woman are very interested in Jesus. So let's look at the way that these two people are interested in Jesus. We'll look at Simon first.

[19:42] Look with me at verse 39. Now, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, dot, dot, dot.

Now, what did Simon see? What is the this that Simon saw when he saw this? Well, what Simon saw and what Simon noted with great interest was the way in which Jesus reacted to the woman's behavior.

The woman came in uninvited and she made a rather embarrassing scene. She came right up behind Jesus to the couch that he was resting on. She broke open her flask of ointment and she began to sob like that.

That's rather embarrassing, isn't it? When it comes to you out of the blue, it's unrestrained and it's disinhibited. And it's not quite what you normally do at a dinner party. Please, will you pass me the parsnips, George?

It's not quite what we do at dinner parties regularly, is it? Now, this woman was not asking for the parsnips, but the tears were running down her face and dripping off the end of her nose and her chin.

[20 : 50] That's what happens, isn't it, when you're crying very freely. And she deliberately let those tears land on Jesus's feet. And then, kneeling down behind him, she took hold of her long hair and she used it as a towel.

And then, she began to kiss his feet and she took this ointment and she began to rub it over his feet. Now, Simon the Pharisee was looking at this scene across the table with very great interest. And what really interested him was not so much the woman's behavior as Jesus's reaction to it. And you can see Simon going into analytical mode.

He's cool. You might almost say he is coldly analytical. He doesn't jump up from the table all flustered and shoo the woman out into the street and say to her, My dear lady, we simply cannot behave like this in this house.

I'll have to ask you to leave immediately or else I should call the police. Not at all. He's far too interested in Jesus's reaction to the woman to behave like that. He sits there and he watches with great interest.

[21 : 56] He flicks a switch in his mind and he goes into full analytical mode. He's a little bit like an experienced wine taster who's sipping a wine of rather doubtful quality and wondering if he can really recommend it.

He's saying to himself, this tastes rather odd to me. I don't think I can endorse this fellow at all. I mean, if he were really a prophet, I'm paraphrasing verse 39 here.

If he were really a prophet, he would have the spiritual perceptiveness to distinguish the good from the bad. But his nose doesn't seem to be able to pick up the scent of immorality.

He doesn't seem to have the capacity to see what an awful woman this woman is. Now, there's something ironical about all this, because here is Simon looking down on the woman from a great moral height and judging her and condemning her as a sinner who has no hope.

But he's also looking down at Jesus, isn't he, and judging him and writing him off as a man who lacks the spiritual insight he ought to have and therefore could not possibly be a prophet. And yet, truly, the one who lacks understanding is Simon.

[23 : 05] It's his mind that is failing to penetrate to the real identity of Jesus. And he's equally unable to see what is happening to this woman. He thinks that he has true sight, that he has 20-20 moral vision.

And yet, he's the one who is failing to understand what is going on before his very eyes. So, Simon is very interested in Jesus, but in the end, he completely misreads him.

Now, let's look at the kind of interest that the woman has in Jesus. We looked earlier at verse 37, and we noticed how verse 37 suggests that the woman had in some way come across Jesus before this incident took place.

What could it have been that prompted her to go and get that flask of ointment and go into the house? Well, it was all to do, and this whole passage is all to do with the forgiveness of sins.

This woman's life was morally in a mess. She was known in the city as a sinner, so she had a bad reputation. But she must have gone and listened to Jesus and stood there in the crowd as he taught the people, perhaps on a number of occasions.

[24 : 21] And as she listened to him, something inside her began to change. She heard him talking about God and the kingdom of God and the love of God and the possibility of repentance and forgiveness.

He would speak of himself as if he were the doctor who'd come to heal the sick. He spoke of himself as the savior who came to bring hope to the hopeless. And as she listened to this teaching, it was as if a doorway began to open out in front of her, a doorway into a new world, a world in which she could live as a free human being, a world in which the shackles of her past began to fall off her so that she could at last hold her head up high and no longer be condemned by the people of the city.

Now, it's possible, perhaps likely, that Jesus had already spoken to her in private and assured her that if she repented of her sins, she would be forgiven and she'd be able to start a completely new life, a clean life with her conscience set free.

Now, when she heard, perhaps a few days later, that Jesus was in town again and was having dinner at the house of Simon, she went to her room and she found the most precious and valuable thing that she possessed.

I guess it was the equivalent of a bottle of Chanel No. 5 perfume. Brothers, if you've ever bought that for your wife, you know it's a rather expensive item. It was that kind of thing. And her heart was so full of love and gratitude towards this man who treated her so differently from the way that other men that she'd met treated her.

[25 : 59] She ran, therefore, to Simon's house. She burst in through the door and before she could even get the stopper out of the bottle, out of the flask, the tears began to stream down her cheeks, tears of joy and wonder and thankfulness that there could be a new life for her in the kingdom of God.

This passage is telling the story of this woman's conversion. As the tears stream down her cheeks over Jesus's feet, we see that the resistant citadel of her soul has been stormed.

Love and forgiveness have taken hold of her and have overwhelmed her. We're looking at her being born again in this in this paragraph. This is the beginning of a completely new life for this woman.

So what a different level of interest she had in Jesus from the Pharisee. Simon's interest in Jesus is intellectual and analytical.

It's all mind and no heart. He's sitting in judgment on Jesus, trying to work him out, trying to categorize him. Is this man a prophet or not, he's saying. I think the evidence suggests that clearly he's not.

[27 : 07] But this woman's interest in Jesus is the interest of heart and soul, as well as mind. Luke, you'll notice, doesn't record one word that she says.

She's mute. But the fact that she takes this expensive bottle of perfume and pours it out on Jesus's feet, that speaks more eloquently than a thousand words.

She loves him and she loves him with gratitude and joy. And love, you'll see, is the point of the little story or parable that Jesus tells Simon.

Now, it's clear from verse 39 that Simon is thinking with inside his own head. He's not speaking out loud. But Jesus reads him like an open book. So he says to him in verse 40, Simon, I have something to say to you.

Say it, teacher, answers Simon. And so Jesus speaks on. Simple story. A certain money lender had two debtors. One owed 500 denarii and the other 50.

[28 : 11] When they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both. Now, which of them will love him more? Simon answered, the one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt.

And Jesus said to Simon, you have judged rightly. That's one thing Simon got right, isn't it? But even a young child would have answered that question correctly. So then Jesus gently rebukes Simon.

Simon, when I came into your house, you didn't even offer me the ordinary courtesies of common hospitality. You provided me with no water to wash my feet.

No kiss of welcome. No kiss of welcome. No oil for my head. Those things would be the equivalent in our society of a handshake or taking somebody's coat and hanging it up. Now, in other words, Jesus says, Simon, there was no warmth of welcome from you to me.

None of the usual friendly, heartwarming customs. But this woman, she's washed my feet and kissed my feet and anointed them with this ointment. And the point I'm making, Simon, is this, that the love she has shown me demonstrates that her sins have been forgiven and that she knows they've been forgiven.

[29 : 25] Her sins have been many. Yes, indeed. But they've all been forgiven. And when that happens to a person, that person shows a great deal of love in response. And then Jesus turns to her and he says to her directly, your sins are forgiven.

More literally, the Greek reads, your sins have been forgiven. It's a past tense, a perfect tense there. It's done. Your sins have been forgiven.

They are now past history. Water under the bridge. Dealt with. Gone. Now, this is the savior at work. And that's why he's able to say to her at the end, go in peace.

It's when we know that our sins have been forgiven that we're able to go our way in peace. The war has ended. No longer is there a state of hostility between ourselves and God.

God has made peace and has pronounced it so we can go our way and live in peace with him. Now, friends, as we draw to a close, let me ask one or two questions which arise from this passage. [30 : 39] Here's my first question, as if it was just you and me in the room together talking to each other. Let me ask, what kind of interest is your interest in the Lord Jesus?

I assume that every person here tonight is interested in him in some way or another. You would hardly have turned out on a great January evening if you were not interested in Jesus at all. But my question is, what kind of interest is your interest in him? Could it be like Simon's? An intellectual interest. An interest that wants, as it were, to weigh Jesus up and to question him and to analyze him.

Even an interest that wants to sit in judgment upon him. The famous and articulate new atheists of today, people like Christopher Hitchens who died just a few weeks ago, they have that kind of interest in Jesus.

They write books about him. They're very interested in him. And yet they are his enemies. On the other hand, is your interest in Jesus like the interest of the woman in Luke's account?

[31 : 46] Let me ask one or two other questions. Have you ever wept at the thought that you have sinned greatly against God? And have you wept at the thought that God could have rejected you forever and yet has not?

Instead, he sent his son to purchase your forgiveness at the cost of his own life. There was only one way in which your sins and my sins could be forgiven.

No amount of money could secure our forgiveness. No amount of prayers or good works or charity could earn our forgiveness. As the Bible says, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.

It was only the blood of Christ shed in death that could rescue us from the power of death and hell and bring us to the kingdom of heaven. This woman sank to her knees and wept tears of gratitude and sorrow and joy and love.

That's what the human soul does when its resistant citadel has been conquered. Is that true of you? There is nothing greater in human experience than to know that our sins have been forgiven.

[33 : 05] The forgiveness of sins is the center of the gospel. It's what we need to know more than anything else. Because if our sins are not forgiven, our entrance into heaven is blocked and barred.

But once we come to him, to Jesus, and fall at his feet with trusting and grateful hearts, we shall hear his words echoing through our souls.

Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

Let's bow our heads and let's thank him. Lord Jesus, our dear friend and our saviour, we think of this woman and we think of her tears and her gratitude and her joy.

And we think of your words to her, those wonderful words which conveyed to her the message that she so needed to hear. Your sins have been forgiven. Go your way in peace.

[34 : 12] And our prayer, Lord Jesus, is that each of us here in this building should know that. In the future, if we don't know it already, we pray that there'll be no person here who finds the entrance to heaven in the end, blocked and barred because our sins are unforgiven.

Be at work in our hearts. Have mercy upon us, we pray. And we thank you. Amen. Amen.