

JESUS HAD DINNER WITH SIMON THE PHARISEE**LUKE 7:36-50**

It looks very impressive from a distance. It's ninety-eight feet tall. It's made of 635 metric tons of reinforced Brazilian tile. It stands on a mountain a mile and half above sea level. It's the famous "Christo Redentor" (Christ the Redeemer) statue that overlooks the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The head of the statue is nine feet tall all by itself. The wingspan from one fingertip to the other is ninety-two feet. Yes, from a distance this amazing statue or sculpture of Jesus is awesome, majestic, and powerful. But you might be a little disappointed when you take a closer look. Why is that? There's a close up of the face of Jesus, and you'll notice the eyes have a rather bland appearance as if Jesus was blind. The sculptor didn't fashion circles that might even suggest pupils. Can you imagine Jesus being blind? Can you imagine Jesus as someone unable to see the pain, the needs, or the sorrows of His followers? The face of Jesus has a strong appearance. We probably like what's suggested by that – that Jesus was a strong man in every sense of the word. But on the chest of Jesus is a valentine-like heart positioned on the outside of His robe. Can you imagine Jesus having a heart of stone? Can you imagine Him as hard-hearted or lacking compassion? True, the artist had no intent whatsoever of portraying either a blind Jesus or a stone-hearted Jesus. But those are possible interpretations of his work, aren't they?

What's my point? We all picture Jesus a certain way. What kind of a Jesus do you worship and follow? What kind of a Redeemer do you have? We are now in the season of Lent – forty days leading up to Holy Week set aside by Christians the world over to reflect upon the significance and meaning of Jesus – His life, His suffering, His death, and His resurrection. This Lenten and Easter season I'm presenting a series of messages called "Guess Who's Coming To Dinner"? It's a look at seven stories in the Gospel of Luke that all have one thing in common: Jesus shared a meal with one or more people in each story. What would it be like to have Jesus drop by your home for dinner? Each encounter tells us something important about who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Today, I want you to consider with me what happened when Jesus had dinner at the home of a man named Simon. Now, there were probably a lot of people at Simon's house for dinner, but the story focuses on just three people – a nameless woman, the host, Simon the Pharisee, and Jesus. First, let's focus on...

THE TRUTH THE WOMAN REVEALED.

She's never identified by name. All we get is a description of her occupation which the Message translation puts bluntly and correctly, "Just then a woman of the village, the town harlot..." (Lk 7:37 MSG) She was a prostitute living and working right there in Simon's town. She decided to drop in on a meal at Simon's home to which Jesus had been invited. Back in that day and time, a meal like this was kind of a total village experience not a completely private affair for a few invited guests in a secluded dining room. The more the merrier! Anyone – even the town prostitute - was pretty much allowed to hang out in the courtyard or sit on the floor in the dining room in order to hear the conversation around the table. You might even get lucky and receive some leftovers at the end of the evening. So this woman was there in Simon's home, but she

was no doubt completely ignored by him and the invited guests. That was fine with her, because she wanted to be close to Jesus and hear more of what He might say about God's love and forgiveness for sinful people like herself.

Back then, people didn't sit in chairs at tables like we do now to have dinner. Instead they reclined on couches around a low table often shaped in a big U so everyone could see and speak to everyone else. You propped yourself up on your left elbow and ate with your right hand while your legs stretched out behind you. This woman got to Jesus and knelt at His feet. What was she there to do? She'd brought some perfume to the dinner because she wanted to honor and thank Jesus by pouring some of it on Him as a kind of anointing. The only part of Jesus' anatomy available to her at this point were his feet sticking out behind him.

She kneels at Jesus' feet and begins to cry. Why? What were these tears all about? Fascinating theories abound! Some say she was overwhelmed with great sorrow over her sinful lifestyle. Others say she was shedding tears of gratitude over God's forgiveness being offered through Jesus. Still others say she was angry. Like everyone else at the dinner, she had observed Jesus being treated rudely by Simon who didn't offer Jesus the normal courtesies extended to any dinner guest. Simon didn't offer to have Jesus' feet washed or anoint His head and hands with olive oil. So, perhaps, she was angry over how rudely Jesus – this One she had come to so love and appreciate - had been treated and how powerless she was to do anything about it.

This woman made up her mind to do for Jesus what Simon the Pharisee had not done – to wash the dirt and dust off Jesus' feet. To anoint Him, not with olive oil, but with some of her own perfume. She let her long hair loose from its covering to use as a towel to dry Jesus' feet. That probably caused a stir! In that culture, a woman's uncovered hair was considered sexually provocative. That's one reason why in many parts of the Middle East today, women cover their hair. But everyone already knew who and what she was. What did she have to lose? Jesus feet were wet. Her hair was dry. Then, taking a little flask of perfume, she poured it over Jesus' feet. And bending over, she began to kiss His feet – not once, not twice, but over and over again continually.

So, what truth does this interesting woman reveal? First, because of Jesus, my failures are not final. Some people in our country today argue that prostitution ought to be legal because, they say, it's a "victimless crime." The truth is any and all sin has a victim and there's no greater victim of sin than the person who commits it. This woman had been stripped of any dignity and self-respect. Healthy self-esteem had been destroyed. She was by everyone's definition back then – and probably here and now as well – a failure. She was a moral failure, a social failure, and a spiritual failure. Failure defined her life.

The Pharisees – of which Simon was one – taught that repentance for sin demanded at least three things: verbal confession, a resolve not to sin in that way again, and financial compensation to God for your sin to be truly forgiven. That financial compensation part pretty much shut the door on God's forgiveness for this woman! Now the Bible doesn't say so, but I believe this woman had heard Jesus teach about

God's love for sinners and perhaps had even spoken to him personally before this dinner. She understood, perhaps for the first time ever, that she could be forgiven by God and cleansed of her sin. For the first time in her life, she had hope that a new start was possible! Perhaps she had heard Jesus say those words that are so precious to us as well, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." (Mt 11:28-30 NLT)

Have you ever failed? You blew it. You were wrong. You let other people down. You let yourself down. Failure can multiply and get very heavy. Someone has suggested that failure is, first of all, like little pebbles we carry in our hands. But because we fail more, our hands get too full, so we stuff our failures into our pockets. Soon our pockets are bulging with failures, too. Next, we transfer the load to a bag we carry on our shoulders or drag along behind us. What's in those sacks of failure that we carry around? A sin that always seems to get the best of us... a failed marriage... broken relationships with our kids or parents... sexual immorality... an abortion in our past... a run-in with the law... misuse or dishonesty with money... betrayal of a spouse or a friend... a pattern of stealing or lying... racism... greed for money or the things money can buy. Failure comes in all shapes and sizes, but all of them look large and final.

Notice how this woman came to Jesus. It's a picture of real repentance. She didn't make excuses for her failures. She didn't try to minimize them. She didn't come to Jesus with her own self-improvement plan. And she wasn't content to stay defeated by her failures. She came – like that wonderful old song puts it -"just as I am without one plea." She dared to believe that God would forgive her sin if she honestly, truly confessed her failures to God and, by His grace, turned away from her life of sin. She dared to believe that God would forgive her failures and separate her from them as far as the east is from the west. She discovered that God can abolish the seeming finality of our failures. Have you discovered that wonderful truth yet? Have you stopped making excuses for your failures? Stopped minimizing them? Stopped with the self-improvement plan? Stopped being defeated by your failures? Instead, you just throw yourself upon God's infinite mercy and grace and discover that your failures no longer define you? Because of Jesus, your failures are not final.

I see another truth revealed by the woman. God's extravagant forgiveness deserves my extravagant gratitude. One point of Jesus' story is that those who are forgiven of a whole lot of sin usually respond with a whole lot of gratitude. People who have been in the grip of some sort of very big, outward, visible kind of sin often experience God's forgiveness in a wonderfully powerful way? By the same token, people who commit little, hidden, respectable sins usually appreciate forgiveness less. That's just the way it is – even Jesus knew that. There's something wonderfully and extravagantly grateful about this woman's reaction to God's grace, love, and forgiveness. She threw caution to the wind. She had no idea how Jesus would respond to her act. Would he receive it as genuine or reject it as inappropriate? She risked even greater disgust from and rejection by her neighbors. But it didn't matter. She had been forgiven so much! She had to express her thanks in the biggest way she could imagine. When I see her

extravagant gratitude, I have to ask myself, “Rick, do you ever express your gratitude for God’s forgiveness extravagantly? Is it always just measured and appropriate gratitude? What would extravagant gratitude look like for me?” The only answer I can come up with is living every day totally abandoned to God’s mission in this world, not my own plans and ambitions. How about you? What does extravagant gratitude look like for you? How would you express it? Let’s think now about...

THE TRUTH SIMON THE PHARISEE REVEALED.

What can we say about him? He was a Pharisee – a member of a Jewish religious group in Jesus’ day that was highly moral, outwardly religious, theologically orthodox, and generally respected. He was probably wealthy because he had a home big enough to accommodate a large dinner party. Simon, the prosperous. Simon, the pillar of the community. Simon, the mover and shaker. You could not find a greater contrast to the woman in this story than Simon. He was everything she was not and vice versa. Why did Simon invite Jesus to his home for dinner? The Bible doesn’t say. There’s little doubt that Simon treated Jesus rudely, however. If you came to my home for dinner, you’d expect a certain protocol. I’d meet you at the door, express my appreciation that you’d come, take your coat, inquire how you’re doing, and perhaps offer you a hot or a cold drink. If I didn’t do those things, you’d feel I’d been rude to you. Simon was rude to Jesus. He didn’t greet Jesus with a customary kiss on the cheek, offer him water to wash His feet, or give him any olive oil to put on his head and hands.

Here’s an insight I get from focusing on Simon. Simon wanted to define the Jesus he wanted, instead of encountering the real Jesus. “If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She’s a sinner!” (Lk 7:39 NLT) Prophets don’t act like this! Men of God don’t tolerate stuff like this! Many people today want a Jesus they can define for themselves. Some of them even attend church regularly. They’re quick to create a Jesus of their own liking who meets their own needs. Pastor and author, Max Lucado, talks about people who have what he calls a “Rabbit Foot Redeemer.” This is the kind of Jesus that sort of fits in your pocket. He’s easily understood and easily controlled. His specialty is getting you out of jams. What happens when you want or need something? You rub the Redeemer for good luck like a rabbit’s foot! No need to love Jesus, respect Jesus, or follow Jesus. Others see Jesus as an “Aladdin’s Lamp Redeemer.” This Jesus exists to get us new and better jobs, new and better spouses, new and better things. Your wish is His command. And the best part? When it’s not convenient to have Jesus around, He just gets back in the lamp. For still others, Jesus is “The Price is Right Redeemer.” All right, Jesus, once a week I’ll go to church and endure any sermon You throw at me. In exchange, please give me the grace behind door #2! The great danger of wanting a Jesus you can define comfortably to meet your needs is that you never really encounter the real Jesus.

Poor Simon! You’ve got to admit, this was an odd, bizarre scene, to say the least. Here’s the town prostitute making a spectacle of herself in his home - crying uncontrollably, uncovering her hair in public, drying Jesus’ tear washed feet with her hair, and then putting perfume on his feet and kissing them over and over again. I think

if any of us would have been there that night we'd have said, "What is that about? What on earth is going on here?" Jesus knew exactly what Simon was thinking and feeling. In response, Jesus tells a little parable. "A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts." (Lk 7:41-42 NLT) Yes, people who receive God's forgiveness for their many sins respond with tremendous gratitude. But notice something else about Jesus' story that's equally significant. Neither debtor was able to repay the debt even though one owed far less than the other. Both were in a hopeless condition needing great mercy. God is the creditor in Jesus' story. Sure, the woman owed the greater debt. Jesus wasn't going to argue that point. But Simon's sins were more than enough to keep him from ever having a relationship with God based on the merits of his own goodness.

That reveals a second truth when we focus on Simon. Everyone is in need of God's extravagant forgiveness, because my own sin makes it impossible to save myself. Jesus' story illustrates what the Bible says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Rom 3:23 NLT) Suppose three men are out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in a sailboat trying to cross from California to the coast of China. A great storm comes up and sinks their boat. The first man has never learned to swim. He drowns in a few moments. The second man is just your average, recreational swimmer. He manages to stay afloat for an hour or two, but he eventually sinks into the depths as well. The third man is an Olympic long distance swimmer. He has the skill and strength to swim for several miles, but what difference does that make when you're in the middle of the Pacific Ocean? I got a sense of the Pacific Ocean's enormous expanse just flying over it a few years ago. It took 12 hours going at a speed of several hundreds of miles per hour! That third man's destiny ends up being the same as his two friends. Sure, some people are better than others, or less sinful than others. Nevertheless, the expanse between God's absolute holiness and my feeble, inadequate goodness is so infinite, so vast, and so enormous that the thought of ever being good enough for God is laughable. Simon the Pharisee needed God's extravagant forgiveness just as much as that woman - the town prostitute. And so do you and I. Finally, let's focus on Jesus in this story. Let's think about...

THE TRUTH JESUS REVEALED.

First, by accepting the woman's actions, Jesus confirmed her judgment that He was God. I doubt the woman could articulate her suspicions about Jesus' full identity, but her actions tell us that she worshiped Jesus as God. Would you feel comfortable being treated like this by another human being – the kneeling, the kissing of feet? Would you consider it appropriate for someone to treat another person like this if he or she was just a human being? Probably not. I'm reminded of a story about Abraham Lincoln at the close of the Civil War. When the capital of the Confederacy – Richmond, Virginia – fell to the Union Army, Lincoln insisted that he be taken to visit the still burning city. When he arrived, he was pointed to a former slave, who rushed to the president, fell on his knees, and began to kiss Lincoln's feet. Embarrassed, Lincoln said, "That's not right. You must kneel to God only, and thank Him for liberty." That's how any mere, normal

human being can and should respond. By accepting this woman's act of extraordinary gratitude, we get insight into Jesus' self-knowledge. Jesus considered what she did as being appropriate in light of who He was: God in human flesh.

Second, Jesus revealed that certain attitudes cut you off from God's forgiveness and grace. There's a great irony here. Yes, the good news of Jesus is for everyone. True enough. But, in another sense, the good news of Jesus is not for everyone. Simon the Pharisee represents that group of people back then and today as well. If you believe you can save yourself through your own good behavior, you can't receive God's grace. If you resent the truth that you're a hopeless sinner, you can't receive God's forgiveness. If you reject that idea that Jesus only came for those who could not save themselves, you put yourself outside what His cross and the empty tomb accomplished.

Third, Jesus revealed that receiving God's forgiveness has everything to do with God's grace and nothing to do with your worthiness or effort. The woman in this story represents that group of people and today as well. There could be no greater gap socially, morally, or religiously between Simon the Pharisee and the town prostitute, but she was the one who received God's grace and forgiveness. An eternal relationship with God is never offered and never experienced because of how much money you have, what color you are, how much education you've received, or even how much or how little you sinned before you made Jesus the Savior and the Lord of your life. The old saying is true: "the ground at the cross is level." Don't misunderstand me. That's never a license just to keep on sinning. Jesus never excused or minimized this woman's sin. He called her out of it. He called her to life change and transformation. God doesn't love your failures, but He does love you. Finally, the only One who has the right to condemn you, offers you forgiveness based on God's grace alone. When you throw ourselves upon that grace, Jesus is able to say to you what He said to this woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Lk 7:50 NLT)

We began in Brazil today, let's finish there, too. Maria's husband had died when their daughter, Christina, was just an infant. The young mother, stubbornly refused opportunities to remarry, instead got a job and set out to raise her young daughter. And, now, 15 years later, the worst years were over. Maria's salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, but it was reliable and provided food and clothing. Their small house was simple but adequate – one large room on a dusty street in a little Brazilian village. The furnishings were modest: a pallet on either side of the room served as beds, a washbasin, and a wood burning stove. And now Christina was old enough to get a job to help out. She was a pretty, spirited young lady with dreams of how exciting it would be to live and work in the big city. Maria was always quick to remind Christina of how harsh and brutal the streets could be. In addition, she knew exactly what Christina would do or would have to do to survive.

That's why Maria's heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter's bed empty. She knew immediately where her daughter had gone and what she must do to find her. On her way to the bus stop she went into a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. Pictures of herself in those little instant photo booths. Lots of them. With her

purse full of black and white photos, Maria boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro. Maria knew only too well what her stubborn daughter would have to do to survive. She began to search in bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for street walkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left a picture of herself – taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note. It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, so Maria had to go home. She pretty much wept the entire bus journey back to her small village.

A few weeks later, young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her dream had become a nightmare. How she longed for her simple bed back home and the love of her mother, but her old life in that little village seemed, for many reasons, too far away. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." And she did.

That's the Gospel right there. Grace. Forgiveness. Coming to the end of yourself. Coming home to God. Has that happened to you? It can today.