Jesus, a Pharisee and a Sinful Woman
Luke 7:36-50

Now we've seen over the last few weeks that Luke has brought the stories in chapter 7 together to answer the question, 'Who is Jesus?' If you've ever been involved in any kind of research you'll know that a key step is framing a question that you want to seek the answer to. Some of those research questions are such small print that you might be tempted to wonder why someone would bother trying to find the answer. But you could never say that about this question regarding Jesus. It's no exaggeration to say that 'who is Jesus?' has got to be one of the most crucial questions you have to form an answer to in life, because so much hinges on the answer.

It's a question that this Pharisee named Simon also had an interest in answering. He's heard about Jesus' miracles, he's heard Jesus teach and he's heard the crowd saying a great prophet has arisen. And Simon's intrigued: is Jesus a prophet?

So Simon is interested enough to risk the displeasure and condemnation of his fellow Pharisees and invite Jesus for dinner. But in doing so he gets way more than he bargained for.

We are all debtors

Now so you don't get some flaky ideas about what was going on you need to know a bit about the culture of a dinner like this. You see if you or I had a dinner party and some total stranger pitched up and started crawling about under the table messing with your guests' feet, your reaction would be somewhat different from what happens here. So we need to bridge this gap.

Well, the rabbis would hold special dinners like this which were more or less open to the public – the doors were left open, so that not only their disciples, but uninvited guests could come, not to eat the meal, but to sit at the walls, and listen in and learn from the conversation going on around the table. Which is why this woman could get in without anyone batting an eyelid.

But also, they didn't sit to eat at a table. Instead, there would be a low central table, and the guests would lie down on cushions or couches, on one elbow, with their heads towards the centre and their feet pointing outwards. So you don't need to imagine this woman crawling under the table to try and get to Jesus' feet, trying not to get kicked. Jesus' feet are easily accessible.

But still this lady has to come, and that would be no small step. You see Luke tells us in v37 that she's 'a woman of the city, who was a sinner'. Now, what does that sound like to you? Luke doesn't say it in so many words, but it seems likely she's a prostitute, and prostitutes don't make a habit of turning up to dinner parties hosted by Pharisees. So something must have persuaded her to go, something must be going on in this woman's life to want to risk public humiliation like this. So what is it? Well, as one commentator (Bock) points out, throughout this story this lady doesn't say a word. Simon the Pharisee speaks, and Jesus speaks, but she doesn't speak a word, yet her actions speak a thousand words. And the parable that Jesus tells of the two debtors, and we'll look at it in detail in just a minute, makes it clear that what she does, is in response to her having been forgiven. She doesn't come seeking forgiveness, she doesn't do these things to

Jesus and in response Jesus says, well done, you've now earned your forgiveness, no, Jesus says she does these acts because she has already been forgiven, she loves much because she's been forgiven much.

So here is a lady, almost certainly a prostitute, who picks up the courage to enter the dragon's lair, because Jesus has turned her life around. Maybe she's had some private meeting with him, maybe she's stood in the crowd and heard him speak, which ever it was and Luke doesn't say, this woman has encountered the grace and the forgiveness of God in Jesus, her life is being transformed and she hears Jesus is having dinner there and she goes with the intention of anointing his feet with perfume.

But before she manages to do that, she starts crying. Now ladies don't you just know what that feels like – you're emotional about something – happy or sad – and you've got to talk to someone about it, and you're determined not to cry, but you just can't help it. And despite all your best efforts you find yourself welling up and starting to blub! Well, here comes this lady, wanting to express her gratitude, her thankful love for Jesus, but as she steps forward she just can't keep the tears back, and tears of love and thankfulness fall onto Jesus' dusty, dirty feet, and the grime starts running and as she kneels there behind him, she lets down her hair and wipes those feet clean with her tears and her hair, before kissing and anointing them with the ointment.

But it's that action, of touching Jesus, that freaks Simon the Pharisee out: v39: '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.' It's interesting, isn't it, that it's the touching bit that gets to him. He's a Pharisee – and Pharisees and prophets worth their name don't allow sinners to touch them. And Jesus is letting this woman way too close. You see Simon doesn't want a religion that gets messy with sinners, he wants a religion that keeps sin and sinners at arms length. And just track Simon's thinking with me: Jesus is letting her touch him. Which means Jesus can't realize she's a sinner. Which means Jesus is not a prophet. Which means Simon has the answer to his question of who Jesus is – or isn't. He can't possibly be a prophet because he's let this sinner get close to him.

But Jesus knows exactly what type of woman she is. In v47 Jesus talks of 'her sins, which are many' – Jesus knows her sins, he knows your sins, and my sins. He's not blind to them we can't hide them, like you might delete the history on your web browser, he doesn't sweep them under the carpet. He calls this woman's sin what it is: sin. So contrary to what Simon the Pharisee thinks, Jesus knows exactly who's touching him.

But he also knows more than that. You see Jesus even knows Simon's thoughts. He doesn't just know what kind of woman she is, he knows what kind of man this Pharisee is.

So Jesus turned to Simon his host and said, v40, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Now, just beware when Jesus has something to say to you! When Jesus has something to say to you very often it's the equivalent of being taken to the

woodshed! When Jesus speaks to you, through his word, through a friend, through a sermon, it's not always comfortable, it's not always the stuff you want to hear.

And Jesus proceeds to tell Simon a parable, about a moneylender who is owed money by two debtors. One debtor owes him fifty denarii – which was a couple of months wages for the average person, and the other owed him ten –times as much, five hundred denarii – just short of two years wages. But neither of these debtors could pay the money lender back.

Now just work through this parable. Who's the moneylender? – God. And what's the debt? – Sin. Who's the person owing 500 denarii? – This woman. And the man who owes fifty denari is Simon. But here's the point: neither of them – the 50 or the 500 - could pay back their debt. It doesn't matter how much you owe, if you can't pay back the debt, you're in trouble. And Jesus sees this woman weeping tears of thankfulness for a changed life and he knows, and she knows, that she is in debt up to her eyeballs in sin, but God has forgiven her her debt. But Simon, the Pharisee, who is just as much a debtor, just as unable to pay back his debt as this woman, just doesn't see himself that way. Because religious people don't.

Simon doesn't think of himself as a sinner. He sees others that way, but not himself. He doesn't think he needs help, doesn't see himself as in need of forgiveness, feels no sense of debt to God. But he's still a debtor, unable to pay.

You see, we're all debtors. It doesn't matter whether you've tried to live a squeaky clean life or like me you have a growing list if sins of which you are deeply ashamed, we're all in debt to God and unable to pay. And what Jesus says to Simon is that how you respond to God is crucially dependent on whether or not you understand you're a forgiven debtor: v42, Simon, 'which of them will love [the moneylender] more?' Simon answers, somewhat grudgingly "The one I suppose for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And Jesus said, "you have judged rightly."

Why knowing it matters:
You see, this woman's expression of love for Jesus is not what earns her forgiveness. The whole point of what Jesus is saying to Simon is that it's because she has been forgiven much, that she loves much. And for you and me, it is rightly understanding God's love for us, and grace towards us, and forgiveness of us, that will impact how we respond to him.

So, firstly, let's look positively. ***What are some of the good fruit of rightly understanding you're a forgiven debtor?***

1. It affects your worship. Jesus is saying here that knowing you are forgiven, that God has been gracious to you when you couldn't pay your debt of sin yourself, liberates you to worship. It's the wellspring of love in worship. That's what this woman is doing. Her heart is overflowing with thankfulness to God.

Now, Simon of course, is freaked out by all this. He doesn't want tears or people humbling themselves or hair being let down or public displays of emotion. He wants a religion that's all intellectual and ordered and proper. But when you know your sins are forgiven, there can be no such intellectual detachment!

And knowing you're a forgiven debtor sets you free to worship the right things. You see we're all, always, tempted to worship and give our lives for those things that aren't God. Money, sex, career, marriage, family. But rightly understanding yourself before God, and the extent of his love for you, delivers you from that. You see what is this alabaster jar of ointment this lady breaks over Jesus' feet? It's probably the most valuable thing she possesses. But when she realizes what God has done for her in Jesus, nothing could now be more valuable to her than Jesus. Things begin to take their right value in her life.

What's more, wealthy women of that day would wear these little alabaster flasks of perfume around their necks. And the flasks would have these long necks, so the ointment didn't come out, but the aroma did. So it's likely that this perfume was part and parcel of this woman's life, it's one of the things that made her attractive to men, but she breaks it and pours out her means of making money, her security, what's she's trusted in, and pours it on Jesus' feet. Jesus is simply more precious to her than anything else. And we may strive to get our sense of worth, or put our trust in all these other things we might be tempted to worship, like finances or career, but real security comes from worshipping God as God and placing all these other things at His feet.

2. Knowing you're a forgiven debtor enables you to love and show grace and serve others.

I think sometimes we can think the gospel is for not yet Christians or brand new baby Christians. But the gospel is central and key to all of life. You see, if you know you are a debtor and that you are unable to pay God back, and you are only forgiven because he has been gracious to you, that is going to profoundly influence how you see other people. Like, for example, in your marriage, or your family, when someone sins against you. In Ephesians 4:32 Paul says 'forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave you.' If you know you are in debt over your head, and you have been forgiven, you can forgive someone else their debt against you, because nothing done against you compares to your sin against God. And knowing God's underserved, unmerited love towards you, means you can receive that love and extend it to others. And it gives you the impetus to serve others – just as this woman washes Jesus dusty feet with her tears and her hair.

3. Understanding you are a forgiven debtor can deliver you from the fear of what others think of you.

Firstly, this lady dares enter the Pharisee's house, and second she lets her hair down in public, which was unthinkable for a woman of that time. But having encountered Jesus, she doesn't need to live in fear of what others think of her anymore. Now, so often, aren't we held captive by worrying about what others might think – and living in fear of them? The fear of man, which Proverbs 29:25 says 'lays a snare'. But when you know that however much you've messed up,

Jesus Christ forgives you and loves you, it frees you to live for his approval, and not in fear of others.

You see, fundamentally, the Christian faith isn't about being a good person, or living to impress others. The Christian faith is about a relationship with Jesus Christ that leads to your life being transformed by grace.

But what if you don't understand that? What if, like Simon the Pharisee, you think it's about you being good enough?

Let's look negatively: what are the results of not seeing ourselves as forgiven debtors?

In 2 Timothy 2:1 Paul says to Timothy, 'Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.' You see knowing you're forgiven by grace, strengthens you, but the converse is also true: thinking that your –or anyone else's - standing before God is results based, saps and weakens you, for the following reasons:

1. Despair and Pride: If we think it's based on works, on being good enough, either we despair or we fill up with pride; either we feel inadequate in the face of others' lives or achievements, or we look down on them.

2. Pointing the finger: If we don't understand that we're debtors forgiven by grace we can end up pointing the finger at others, and all too often we end up criticizing others for the very sins we commit. I remember once, before Su and I were married, going with my mother to a play at the theatre, which was a distinctly dodgy production, and seeing in the audience a well known evangelical church minister and I sat there tut-tutting: 'Calls himself a Christian and he's here watching this play, what kind of a Christian is he!' all the time forgetting that I just happened to be there as well. It was a 'Martin, I have something to say to you' moment. You see, if you think your or others standing is results based, and you've got to be good enough, it's easy to start pointing the finger, when all the time you're just as much in debt as they are.

3. Misses the transforming power of grace: Failing to understand you're a forgiven debtor kills any expectation that grace transforms lives. Instead you just become cynical. Jesus tells this parable of the debtors to Simon and then turning towards the woman, who is kissing and anointing his feet, he asks Simon in v44 'do you see this woman?' Now, that's a great question! Does Simon see her? Of course he sees her! She's *touching* Jesus, she's a sinner and she's touching Jesus, at this point Simon can't see anything else! But does Simon *really* see her, as she is? Does he see a life transformed, a heart overflowing with love and thankfulness? And the answer is: No. He just sees what she was, he can't see past her past, he doesn't see a life transformed by grace. He doesn't see the woman at all. He just sees her sin. And failing to understand or know or experience the redeeming, restoring, transforming power of God's grace in your own life, and to keep that at the forefront of your thinking leaves you with little ability to see it in others.

4. Miserliness of spirit: Failing to understand you're a forgiven debtor leads to a certain miserliness of spirit. You see Jesus contrasts how this woman responds to Jesus, and how Simon responds: she washes and kisses and anoints his feet, but Simon seems unable even to extend the minimum of greetings. She pours out what is her most treasured possession, but Simon can't even extend to a few mls of cheap olive oil. You see, grace breeds grace. Generosity breeds generosity. But failing to understand that and it's: well, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours; let me see what I can get from you before I spend myself on you.

So, here's the thing, if we are all debtors, and understanding that is so crucial to how we relate to God in worship and to others in life, how does this forgiveness work?

Paying off the debt

This woman comes in response to God's transforming work in her life. Her debt, which was big, has been forgiven her. As Jesus says in the parable, the moneylender has cancelled her debt. And there is no debt too big for God to cancel.

But the thing about debt is that someone still has to pay. Someone still has to take the financial loss, and if the moneylender simply cancels the debt, he is saying to his debtors: you can go free, I'll take the hit myself.

So when Jesus says to this women her sins are forgiven her, her debt is cancelled, he's saying 'God is taking the debt upon himself. God is going to pay the debt for you. He's going to take the hit.' Now, how does He do that? Paul says in Colossians 2:13-14: God has 'forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.' No works of restitution, no purgatory, no trying to pay the debt back. God in his grace cancels the debt and He does it by Jesus paying the price at the cross

So, whilst Simon and the others around the table are all hot under the collar asking 'who is this, who even forgives sins?', Jesus is more than just a prophet claiming to do that, he will become the very means by which sins can be forgiven.

And so he says to this woman in v50: 'your faith has saved you' – saved by grace, through faith, 'go in peace'. Literally 'go *into* peace'. Church, when you know you're a debtor, when you know that God has cancelled that debt out of his sheer abundant grace, when you know that the cross of Jesus is the ultimate expression of his love for you, and you quit and repent of trying to show God how good you are, because you'll never be good enough, then like this woman you can walk into peace: there's no need to strive or prove yourself, no need to live in fear, instead there is the enduring peace of forgiveness that isn't dependent on you making the grade, the peace of a life that's been saved and beginning to be put right.