

# VERIFIABLE LOVE

LUKE 7:36-50

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# Verifiable Love

Luke 7:36-50

It seems to me that Luke chose a very interesting place to insert this incident. Remember, the Gospels are not necessarily in the exact chronological order. The events are all true and accurate. However, we know the Gospel writers placed the events at different stages perhaps for teaching or theological reasons. Jesus preached the Sermon on the Plain in which He laid down some incredible demands for holy living to those who wanted to be called His disciples. He then healed a Centurion's servant without having face to face contact with the Centurion or his servant. Jesus expressed amazement at the Roman Centurion's faith. Then Jesus and His entourage went to the city of Nain where they met a funeral procession going out of the city as they were entering the city. Jesus interrupted the funeral and raised the guest of honor from the dead and gave him back to his widowed mother.

In the meantime, Jesus' cousin John the Baptist had been arrested by King Herod because John was publicly calling Herod and his wife Herodias out for their heinous sins of adultery, immorality, and their illegitimate marriage. We also said that John was soon to be executed by Herod. John wanted to make sure Jesus was the real deal so he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if indeed He was the Promised Messiah of Israel. Jesus said He was by word and deed. Jesus healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, cast out demons and preached the Good News that God was reconciling people to Himself. Then Jesus went on to give a public discourse of what a great prophet John was. He complimented those who had received John's message of repentance and His own message of salvation but He rebuked those who rejected both John's message and His message. He said that people rejected the message not because of the messengers but because of their own hardened hearts. Jesus pointed out that because John lived an ascetic life, the religious leaders said he was demon possessed. And contrary to John, Jesus freely ate and drank with people and they called Him a glutton and a drunkard.

Keep in mind we also said that for the most part the New Testament portrays Pharisees as bad guys, but it also makes the point that not all the Pharisees and religious leaders were evil. Some placed their faith in Jesus. In today's passage, we see Jesus accept an invitation to go to a Pharisee's house for dinner.

The topic of conversation at the dinner turns to love. It's really hard for us to understand love since by nature we are so self-centered. We love ourselves more than we love God or others. Let me give you an example. We had a friend George who had trouble keeping girlfriends long term. Until

one day he received a letter from his fiancé who had broken off her engagement with him about 6 months earlier. Her letter read like this. Dear George, I have been unable to sleep since I broke off our engagement. Won't you forgive and forget? Your absence is breaking my heart. I was a fool. Nobody can take your place. I love you. Let's get back together. All my love, Belinda. XXXOOOXXX P.S. Congratulations on winning this week's lottery. It seems to me that genuine love is something that can't be faked.

I understand why we call Christianity a religion. However, Christianity is much different than any other religion and that is the main idea of this morning's passage. CHRISTIANITY IS A PASSIONATE LOVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HIS PEOPLE. In other words, Christianity is not about do's and don'ts. Without God's love towards us in the suffering and death of Jesus, and our response to Him in faith born out of our love towards Him, there is no such thing as biblical Christianity. Christianity is all about love. Jesus summed it up like this:

"37...'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' 38This is the first and greatest commandment. 39A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40 / NLT).

## **SELF-AWARENESS (VS 35-39)**

Christian love is based on a true knowledge of both self and the other. Verses 36-39 give us some insight into the self-awareness of different people. For the Christian, KNOWING WHO WE ARE AND WHO JESUS IS CALLS FOR A FAITH RESPONSE OF LOVE. Jesus loves us passionately and once we understand that, the only appropriate response would be to love Him back. In verse 36 we can see that Jesus is aware that He is our Savior. Jesus made it clear that His mission was not to condemn us but to save us. It seems as if a Pharisee in the crowd who listened to Jesus' teaching about repentance and faith responded by inviting Jesus to his house for dinner. Jesus accepts this dinner invitation in the hope of saving this Pharisee. I think if there is one thing that we notice about Jesus is that He is available to all. He doesn't prejudge anyone. If we were to take our identities as Jesus' ambassadors, we should be available to all who want to hear and not prejudge people. Most of all, we must not be impressed by wealth or repulsed by poverty. Jesus came to minister to all people. We should be available to all. I have to say that I think we do this pretty good at Devon Church. Before we leave this section, we need to explain a few things. First of all, the Pharisee must have had confidence in Jesus ritual purity. Otherwise he wouldn't have offered to eat with Him. Next, these banquets were usually held in courtyards. In other words, the house would have had an open courtyard in the center of the complex. When Rabbis had theological discussions around the dinner table, people from the outside,

could easily gather around the courtyard to listen to the discussion. That's how the woman is able to gain access to Jesus. Lastly, they were eating Roman style. They were reclined on sofas leaning on one elbow with their feet behind them. They ate and discussed all sorts of issues.

In verses 37-38 we encounter an insightful sinner. As the dinner progresses, a woman appears behind Jesus. This must have been a strange event. She is weeping. She is not just crying, she is sobbing. Her tears fall on Jesus' feet. And then she does the unthinkable. She lets down her hair and starts to wipe off Jesus' feet with her hair. First of all, a Jewish woman never let her hair down in public. It was considered to be immodest. Secondly, she is probably unclean and she is touching a man. That was unthinkable. And then after she cleaned Jesus' feet, she kissed His feet and anointed them with expensive perfume.

The text says that she was a sinful woman who lived a sinful life. It seems as if everybody in town knew who and what she was. The text doesn't say this, but the most likely scenario is that she was a prostitute. And so as onlookers watched this, it may have looked erotic. It's clear from the rest of the passage that the woman knows exactly who she is and Who Jesus is. Jesus knew this was a sign of repentance and an act of faith. She knew Jesus was the Savior. She knew Jesus was the One Who could forgive sins. She knew she was a sinner who could in no way atone for her sins. She understood that Jesus came to forgive even her sins. This is an act of love on the part of the woman that Jesus would forgive even her sins. Do you ever think that before you can become a Christian you have to clean up your life? Do you ever feel that you have to be good first? Jesus wants you right where you are and He wants you just as you are. To be sure, you will not go back to the same old life, but He wants you where you are. It would be impossible to think that this woman, after receiving forgiveness and salvation from Jesus, would ever go back to being a prostitute again. She understood exactly who she was and exactly Who Jesus was. Jesus understood exactly who she was and exactly Who He was. But the crowd doesn't know. The act of what she was doing looked erotic and something that a prostitute would do in order to gain favor with a man. No wonder Simon gets a little crazy.

Verse 39 portrays him as a blind sinner. As I read through the Gospels, I can see how easy it is for me to be a Pharisee. I think that any of us who truly want to pursue holiness will struggle with not crossing the line into being a Pharisee. I don't want us to miss this. The Apostles are portrayed as constantly being confused and Jesus often mildly rebukes them for being confused. But as I put myself in their shoes, I have to say I still don't have a feel for how Jesus would react and how He expects me to react. For religious Jews, ritual purity was of the utmost importance. If they came in contact with something or someone who was unclean, they would become unclean. Until they went through a purification ceremony, they would be forbidden from participating in the worship services. Now here is the deal. Simon was

confident that Jesus was ritually pure and so he eats together with Jesus. This woman is like a disease. All of a sudden, this unclean woman is touching Jesus, making Him unclean. And now Simon is eating with an unclean person at the same table which would most likely make him unclean too. The Apostles have to be confused as well. Notice this as well. Simon doesn't say anything out loud. He is polite enough not to do that. He is now having second thoughts about Jesus. He reasons to himself that if Jesus were truly a prophet, He would at least be able to know who was touching Him. He surely not let a prostitute touch Him and make Him unclean. There are a couple of things I want to point out. There are some textual variants here. Some of the manuscripts have Simon saying, "If this man was 'the prophet,'" referring to the Messiah. This would indicate that Simon was really thinking Jesus was the Promised Messiah of the Jews. That would be a nice point to make, but the best texts simply indicate Simon thought Jesus was a prophet, not necessarily the prophet.

For the serious Jew, being ritually and ceremonially pure was of the most importance because it was the access to worship that mattered to them most. No wonder Simon is confused. But Simon missed a lot of the relevant data. Even though the religious rule was that when something clean touched something unclean, the unclean always made the clean thing dirty. However, Simon didn't realize that Jesus was God in the flesh and since He was God, He could touch the unclean and make it clean. Next, Jesus knew exactly who the woman was. He knew she was in need of salvation. He knew she was in need of forgiveness and healing. What Simon didn't know was that Jesus knew exactly who he was also.

Jesus knew that Simon was also a sinner in need of salvation but Simon was so focused on this unclean woman, he was blind to his own sin and his own need of salvation. I can see a lot of Simon in me. Oh, I readily accept and admit that I'm a sinner. But I am just as quick to look at others and reason that my sin is not as bad as theirs. I'm sure I don't do this intentionally, but I know it happens. Let me give you an example. I would be all over a guy who cheated on his wife or abused her. I would be furious with him. However, when I take my wife for granted, when I criticize her, or talk angrily to her, it stems from the same type of hard heart. Deep down, the adulterer, the abuser, and I are all guilty of the same root sin. Whenever we look sidewise, we will always come out superior to others because we always look down not at people who are much more holy than us.

Let's recap this section. Jesus knows exactly Who He is. He is the Savior Who came into the world to ransom and save us from our sin. The woman knows exactly who she is, a sinner in need of God's salvation. Simon is blind to his own need for forgiveness because he is focused on the woman. Really the first step in salvation is knowing who we are, sinners in need of forgiveness and Who Jesus is, the Savior Who gave His life to save us from our sins. KNOWING WHO WE ARE AND WHO JESUS IS CALLS FOR A FAITH

RESPONSE OF LOVE. I think that it is imperative that we remind ourselves who we really are and Who Jesus is. We are now saints who have been redeemed by the finished work of Jesus on the cross on our behalf. But we must always keep in mind that we only have this status as saints because Jesus continually applies His blood to our lives. There will never be a time in this life where we are not in need of God's forgiveness and God's grace.

## **GOD-AWARENESS (VS 40-48)**

And that's important as we see that our God-awareness is essential to live out a successful Christian life. KNOWING WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US CALLS FOR A FAITH RESPONSE OF LOVE. It seems to me that this is something we have to grasp lest we fail to understand the nature of Christianity. Unless we truly understand what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we can never love Him for Who He is and what He has done. Jesus gives a practical illustration of God's work in verses 40-43.

Here we encounter another parable of Jesus. Remember, we are not trying to make a point by point between the parable and reality. In other words, God is not the moneylender, The woman is not the person who owed five hundred denarii and Simon the one who owed fifty. That would miss the power of Jesus' parable. But let's go through it.

Keep in mind, Simon has just been thinking that maybe Jesus isn't a legitimate prophet at this time because He allowed this woman touch Him. He hasn't said a thing. But as Simon is pondering this thought, Jesus calls to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." Simon interrupted from his thinking responds very politely and respectfully. He addresses Jesus by the respectful term teacher. He invites Jesus to go ahead and speak to him.

This is the type of parable that common sense only allows for one answer. Simon will have to answer according to common sense and the onlookers will all come to the same conclusion. The parable is crystal clear. Jesus tells the story of two debtors. One owes fifty denarii which is about 2 months' wages. The other owes ten times as much, five hundred denarii. Let's say one guy owes \$6,000 and the other guy owes \$60,000. Being in tough economic times we are in, neither guy could pay what they owed. But lucky for them, a good natured banker held their loans and decided to write off both their debts and mark them paid. Now Jesus poses the question to Simon, "Which of them will love him (the banker) more?" Simon replies, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

Obviously he answered the way Jesus wanted him to because Jesus said he answered correctly. No doubt that's what the onlookers would have answered in their minds and I have to say, I also answered that way. However, is Jesus setting a trap for Simon and those of us who think our sin is not that bad? In the parable Jesus made the point that neither one of

them had the money to pay. What's the difference if one owed 6,000, 60,000, 600,000 or \$6,000,000 if had no ability to pay? I think I want to give away some of the meaning here up front. God is perfectly holy. It doesn't matter if we committed just a few little sins or a whole lot of big sins. One sin separates us eternally and infinitely apart from God. Let's say you were raised in a good Christian home and you remained pure and grew up to be a good Christian. And let's say that I lived a rough and dirty life. Before we confessed our sin and received Jesus in faith, we were both in exactly the same position; separated from God and headed for hell. Both of us had a debt we could not pay. If you were to look sideways at me, in your eyes you would be much higher than me. But when you look at the gap between God and us, the gap is the same distance; infinity. When Jesus suffered and died on the cross, He didn't suffer less for your sins than mine.

Secondly, Jesus has now defined Christianity in terms of love. The banker forgave the debt freely out of love. The debtors ought to respond in love and gratitude.

Now let's look at different responses to God's work in verses 44-46. Please catch the high drama in this next encounter. Jesus sits up, turns to the woman, looks in her eyes and addresses Simon, "Simon, do you see this woman?" She came and washed My feet with the tears of her sobbing. She wiped My feet dry with her hair. She lavished my feet with kisses and anointed them with expensive oil.

On the other hand Simon, I arrived at your house and you didn't provide Me with water to wash my feet. You didn't greet Me with a kiss nor did you anoint My head with oil. Now scholars debate whether this was really a sign of disrespect on Simon's part or perhaps a small social faux pa.

I think that debate may be worthwhile, but I think it misses the point. Jesus was present to both the woman and Simon. Jesus was there to forgive them both of their sins, whatever their sins were. The woman realized that Jesus was there to forgive her of her sins, all of them. She knew Jesus was the superior and she was the inferior so she received Jesus with thankfulness and undying love.

On the other hand, because of his pride, Simon failed to realize that his sin separated him from God and he had a debt of sin that he could not pay as well. And so because of his pride, he approached Jesus almost as an equal. He thought he was a pretty righteous man. He could never identify his need as great as the woman who was a prostitute. I have had people point blank tell me that I had nothing for them because they didn't need God's forgiveness because they thought of themselves as pretty good people. You see, unless we perceive and understand our need for Jesus, there is no way we can be saved. Now remember, I said that Jesus described a faith response on our part as one of love; "Love the Lord your God with all your

heart, all your soul, and all your mind.” No doubt that would be easy for the woman but very difficult for Simon.

In verses 47-48 Jesus describes God’s response to our response. Again, Jesus must have shocked Simon, the Apostles, and the crowd. Keep in mind, Jesus is still talking to Simon, while looking this poor woman in the eyes. He said, “I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven for she loved much.” Can you imagine the whispers in the crowd? “What did He just say? You mean she is forgiven for all of her prostitution without any sacrifices, any penance, or any ritual cleansing ceremonies? Did He just say she was forgiven because of her love? What does that mean?” Can you hear all those whispers from the crowd?

And then Jesus spoke directly to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” Can you imagine how those words must have hit that woman? In one small sentence, she received all her dignity back. In my mind there is no way she would ever go back to prostitution, even if she was starving. For the rest of her life, all she would want to do is demonstrate her love for God.

Let me go back to one more thing Jesus told Simon. He said, “But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” The sad thing for Simon is that he has not realized how much sin he needs to be forgiven of. His perception is that he has not sinned very much, God doesn’t need to forgive him of much, so he really doesn’t love God much. Simon missed an incredible opportunity to embrace Jesus the Messiah, but because of his pride, he missed it. We don’t know whatever happened to Simon. The story ends too abruptly.

But as I look at the responses of the woman and Simon, I know intellectually that my sins are as many and as bad as the woman’s. However, I live with the attitude of Simon, as if my sins weren’t so bad. But they are. If we are to love God the way He wants us to love Him, I really do need to understand what He has forgiven me of. You do too. That’s the only way we can fall in love with Him. I think we could sum this up with the old camp song that said, “I had a debt I could not pay ... He paid a debt He did not owe.” That was my debt Jesus paid as He was tortured, humiliated, and executed. He suffered for my pathetic life and for yours. KNOWING WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US CALLS FOR A FAITH RESPONSE OF LOVE.

## **EVENT-AWARENESS (VS 49-50)**

In verses 49-50 everyone present receives some event-awareness. In other words KNOWING WHY GOD SENT JESUS CALLS FOR A FAITH RESPONSE OF LOVE. We are reminded in verse 49 that Jesus came to die for our sins. Remember I said there must have been a wave of whispering throughout the crowd. Here they verbalize what they were thinking. They started asking, “Who is this Who even forgives sins?” Well it’s Jesus, the Promised Messiah that the Old Testament Isaiah prophesied about:

“4Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.

5But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

6We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4-6 / NIV).

Jesus could forgive people of their sins because He is the One Who would die for them.

And in verse 50 we are reminded that we receive forgiveness by grace through faith. If one were to simply read verse 47 out of context he or she may get the idea that we are saved by works. Jesus told Simon the woman was forgiven of her many sins because she loved much. After all she humiliated herself in public to demonstrate her love for Jesus. Here in verse 50 Jesus makes it clear to the woman that she has been forgiven and saved by faith. The love she demonstrated was an outpouring of her love for what she had already received by faith. It is clear that she was saved by grace through faith. Nothing she could do could earn her forgiveness. But we must also make another corrective. Jesus ends His conversation with her with, “Go in peace.” The New Testament cannot conceive of faith that doesn’t have practical effects. Jesus could not envision this woman going back to a life of prostitution. She would starve to death before selling her body again. We have separated our thoughts, words, and behaviors from our faith. It cannot be. James the brother of Jesus said that faith without works is dead. And the Apostle John put it this way:

“5And you know that Jesus came to take away our sins, for there is no sin in him. 6So if we continue to live in him, we won’t sin either. But those who keep on sinning have never known him or understood who he is.

7Dear children, don't let anyone deceive you about this: When people do what is right, it is because they are righteous, even as Christ is righteous. 8But when people keep on sinning, it shows they belong to the Devil, who has been sinning since the beginning. But the Son of God came to destroy these works of the Devil" (I John 3:5-8 / NLT).

KNOWING WHY GOD SENT JESUS CALLS FOR A FAITH RESPONSE OF LOVE.

There should be absolutely no doubt about who we are and Who Jesus is. There should be absolutely no doubt about what God has done for us or why He sent Jesus to die for us. He loves us passionately and longs for us to love Him passionately. CHRISTIANITY IS A PASSIONATE LOVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HIS PEOPLE.

Where is that passionate love expressed by the woman in today's passage in the modern day church? Do we have a passion to rescue people from the destiny we were headed for before we met Christ? Or perhaps we're like Simon. We don't feel we were ever headed for hell. If we truly felt we were rescued from the fires of hell, we would be bringing people here every week to hear the Gospel preached. Listen to the passion William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army when people told him they were not called to win souls for Christ:

"'Not called!' did you say?' 'Not heard the call,' I think you should say. Put your ear down to the Bible, and hear Him bid you go and pull sinners out of the fire of sin. Put your ear down to the burdened, agonized heart of humanity, and listen to its pitiful wail for help. Go stand by the gates of hell, and hear the damned entreat you to go to their father's house and bid their brothers and sisters and servants and masters not to come there. Then look Christ in the face – whose mercy you have professed to obey – and tell Him whether you will join heart and soul and body and circumstances in the march to publish His mercy to the world."

I pray that this week we would think about who we were and where we were headed before we met Jesus. We were enemies of God headed for an eternity in hell. We should then ponder the extravagant love of God the Father in sending His One and Only Son Jesus to die for our sins. And we must ponder the passionate sacrificial love of Jesus Who came to suffer and die so that we could be reconciled with God. But we must remember that Jesus did not just die for our sins, He died for the sins of the whole world. If we passionately love Christ and others, how can we not tell them about the incredible love God has for them and the relationship He wants to be in with them?