

“Self-Righteousness Blocks Love”

April 24, 2016

Luke 7:36-50

SCRIPTURE INTRO: I’m preaching a sermon series based on a book by Paul Miller called *Love Walked Among Us*. The subtitle is *Learning to Love Like Jesus*.

What Paul Miller does, and what we’re doing, is look at a bunch of stories in the Gospels where Jesus interacts with people, and look for patterns that emerge that give us insight into how Jesus loved people.

The more stories we read, the more layers we’ll add to our understanding.

You will start to see some of the things Jesus does over and over—sometimes surprising things that he does,

sometimes very direct points that he makes with his disciples or other people.

And then we’ll think about how this applies to us

and our interactions with people God has put in our lives.

INTRO: Our Deacons meet monthly at 6:30 in the morning.

There's always a pot of coffee and a bag full of sausage biscuits.

One morning I swung by McDonald's to get the biscuits.

When I got in line, there was a young family in front of me—
mom and dad and two children.

I could tell by the way they were dressed they were on their way to the beach.

It was obvious that they had hit the road early, put the kids in the car while asleep,
and had stopped to get breakfast. The kids had a sleepy but excited but look.

They ordered, I ordered. The dad slipped away to the restroom.

As I was standing there waiting I said:

So, it looks like somebody's going to the beach.

The young mom turned toward me to answer

and suddenly her body language became very reserved.

Without looking at me she said, Yeah, we're going to the beach.

So, I said, Are you kids excited?

And she just sort of nodded at me and pulled her children closer to her

I thought, what's wrong with her?

I was just making small talk. But I was definitely getting a negative vibe.

I glanced down at myself and saw to my humiliation that my pants were unzipped.

Not discretely unzipped, gaping. It looked like a yawning mouth down there.

I turned immediately and fled to a deserted corner of the restaurant to fix things.

And I stayed there until I saw the family leave.

I thought I looked very normal and approachable in my blue blazer and tie.

I was oblivious to my glaring and off-putting flaw.

That's an illustration self-righteousness. You think you're right. And maybe you
are put together in lots of ways, but you're oblivious to your critical spirit.

Paul Miller says it's like bad breath—others can smell it, but you can't.

Miller identifies three things that block love—

judging, self-righteousness, and legalism.

These three love blockers appear often in the Gospels as Jesus' loving interactions
with people are contrasted with the way his disciples and his critics treat people.

We saw last week how the disciples and the Pharisees judged the man born blind,
and how that blocked them from loving him as Jesus did.

Judging, self-righteousness, and legalism overlap in a lot of ways.

All three of them often function together in a person's life.

But there are enough distinguishing features

that it's helpful to consider them separately as we allow the light of God's Word to shine into our hearts and illuminate the dark corners.

This is a beautiful story. For one thing, it's beautifully told.

The way Luke describes what happened at that dinner party, the people involved, the drama, the parable within the story itself—and does it in such a concise, descriptive fashion, it's magnificent. It's a masterpiece.

And it's beautiful in content. It sparkles with the great truths of our faith.

It shows us that trust in Jesus is the only way to salvation.

No person can sin himself or herself past the forgiveness of God, if only believe.

How difficult it is for people to accept they are really great sinners.

Love for God flows out of a forgiven soul.

There is so much in this wonderful story that we're just going to skim over as we focus on this matter of self-righteousness.

So let's jump right in. We'll look at this passage and topic under two headings:

1. How self-righteousness blocks love
2. How we overcome it to become more loving people

MP#1 How self-righteousness blocks love

It keeps you from seeing people and it keeps you from serving people.

First, it keeps you from seeing people rightly, starting with yourself.

I saw myself as all zipped up and presentable.

I wasn't!

I saw the young mom as slightly rude and overly protective.

She wasn't!

One of the main themes of this story is seeing people.

Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner with him.

The Pharisees were a Jewish religious party.

They took the Bible seriously. They believed in miracles and the supernatural.

They believed in sin and judgment, heaven and hell and the future resurrection.

They were patriots who longed for Israel to be free from Roman domination.

The Pharisees were often in conflict with the Sadducees, another religious party.

The Sadducees were collaborators with the Romans and were therefore given most of the positions of political power.

They did not accept all Hebrew Scriptures as the word of God, only certain books.

They did not believe in miracles or in the future resurrection.

Not a perfect analogy, but the Pharisees were the conservatives, Sadducees liberals.

Simon the conservative invited Jesus to dinner because he wanted to see if Jesus was a true prophet. Simon probably had a list of doctrinal questions.

But a weeping woman barged into the dinner party and began touching Jesus' feet and kissing them. We'll talk about all those things in a minute.

Luke doesn't say she was a prostitute. He says, a woman of that town, a sinner.

Most commentators think that means she had a history, a bad moral reputation.

She was loose, she was a home-wrecker.

When she started touching Jesus and he didn't pull away from her,

Simon said to himself. Ok, I have my answer. This man is not a prophet.

Because a prophet was someone who saw people from God's viewpoint and spoke to them the words of God.

So Jesus couldn't be a prophet, according to Simon, because he obviously couldn't see who this woman really was. If he had, he would have condemned her.

Of course, Jesus could see exactly who she was—forgiven child of God.

And Jesus could see what was going on inside Simon too.

Not supernaturally. I don't think he divinely read Simon's thoughts.

I think Jesus the man, Jesus the human being was so attentive and focused he could just tell by the look on Simon's face what thinking. So he told him that parable about the two debtors who were forgiven. The purpose of that parable was to try to get Simon to see himself—as a sinner just like this woman, also in desperate need of God's forgiveness.

Then when he was done with the parable, what did Jesus do and say? Vs. 44. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Picture this in your mind's eye. Jesus has been talking to Simon.

Looking at him across the table, telling him this parable.

All this time the woman is weeping softly at Jesus' feet.

Jesus turns toward her, he looks at her, and asks Simon if he sees her.

What would Simon's eyes have done? Shifted to the woman.

Not just Simon's, everyone there. All the guests.

And Jesus continues to look at her as he describes what she has done for him.

This woman wet my feet with tears. This woman anointed them with perfume.

This woman loves much because she has been forgiven much.

What was Jesus doing?

His body language was mirroring his teaching.

He was trying to get Simon to love woman by showing him how to look at her.

He was teaching Simon how a prophet—in fact, how God—sees people.

He sees us as individuals of infinite value, made in his image, precious to him and also sinners who he longs to forgive when we simply turn to him in repentance and believe. And that repentance makes him love us even more.

Jesus looks at the woman in order to help Simon see both her and see himself.

See how this woman has latched on to the forgiveness of God, and hopefully cause Simon then to see his own need for God's grace.

This is our third story in which we've made this point about the way Jesus loved.

Jesus saw people. He looked at them because he loved them.

And he sometimes saw grief—like the widow. He saw need—like the blind man.

He saw gratitude to God—like this woman. He saw self-righteousness—Simon.

But what he saw moved him to love more deeply.

There is so much here we can learn from Jesus' example.

But my main point is a negative one.

Self-righteousness keeps you from seeing people.

You just see their faults, not anything else.

It also keeps you from serving people, that's the second way it blocks love.

We've seen so far in our study that whenever Jesus felt compassion,

he then moved toward the person.

He helped them in just the right way. He served them.

But self-righteousness often keeps you from moving toward the person.

It keeps you from giving or serving in the way that's really needed.

What did the woman need?

She needed affirmation that she was treasured and forgiven by God.

She needed a gracious acceptance of her expression of gratitude.

But she showed her gratitude in such an awkward manner that we can't but stand in awe at how the Lord responded to her.

We're told that Jesus was reclining at the table.

That was a Greek custom that some Jews had adopted.

You would lay down at a low table on a cushion with your feet pointed away.

Your shoes would be off. That's how she had access to his feet.

In she walked uninvited. That was awkward.

Her presence and reputation would have caused an immediate stir.

And then she started kissing Jesus' feet.

Now, kissing someone's feet was not unknown in that culture.

It was done as the most humble form of honoring someone.

At times it might even be done in a formal, political setting, in which dignitaries kissed the feet of a conquering king to show their absolute subservience.

The same with anointing his feet with perfumed ointment.

It was another culturally recognized way of honoring someone.

But what made this so awkward was the woman's deep emotion.

She was weeping and as she noticed her tears on Jesus' feet,

she loosened her hair and began to use it like a towel.

Jewish women never let down their hair in public, only in their homes.

This shows that she was so caught up in her worship of Christ that she was oblivious to anyone else in the room.

Jesus never recoiled from her. He didn't pull his feet away.

Simon would have. I would have.

Let's go back to verse 44 again, where Jesus turns and looks at her. Not done yet.

Imagine if you were at a gathering, at a party or an important event

and someone speaks up and gets everyone's attention and says:

Do all of you see this man? And he points to a man in the room.

This man was loyal to me at great cost to himself.

This man was there for me in my darkest hour.

You would think, Wow, what an expression of gratitude.

But what if instead of pointing at the man, the whole time, in front of everybody, he was looking at the man eye to eye, face to face.

This man was loyal to me at great cost to himself.

This man was there for me in my darkest hour.

If you were watching that, you would understand it was more than gratitude, it was affection.

You would feel like you are intruding on intimate moment between friends.

That's what Jesus was doing, this woman needed to feel pure affection and regard and he gave it to her, and wasn't worried what people thought.

Self-righteousness blocks that.

And there's someone else in this story who Jesus serves—Simon himself.

Jesus tells the parable about the two debtors, and then in front of everybody he compares Simon's hospitality to this woman's.

You didn't give me water to wash my feet, she washed with tears, wiped with hair.

You didn't give me a kiss, she hasn't stopped kissing my feet.

You didn't anoint my head with oil, she anointed my feet with perfume.

Simon had neglected those courtesies, he had been rude.

That rudeness bothered Jesus, but instead of moving away from Simon, he gave him what he needed—a direct and honest challenge to look at his heart.

I dare say most of us would have responded to Simon in a self-righteous way.

We would have gotten in the car after the dinner party and said—
what a rude, self-righteous pig.

We would have said our goodbyes and then ripped Simon behind his back.

Not Jesus. He was loving even toward this self-righteous man.

Working this out in real life is often hard. How do I know what this person needs?

Will my words of affirmation be taken as approval of a sinful habit?

Is it better to speak up honestly or hold my tongue? What's my motive?

Yes, those are hard questions,

but self-righteousness keeps you from even asking those questions
because it blocks love.

So let's work on our self-righteousness and those things will work themselves out.

MP#2 How we overcome it to become more loving people

The key is in verse 47. Jesus says:

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much.

But he who has been forgiven little, loves little.”

Now, it takes some careful attention to get the Lord's point right.

He doesn't minimize her sins. "They are many" he says.

But, he says they are forgiven for she loved much.

That doesn't mean her sins were forgiven because she loved much.

It means that she loved much because she knew her many sins had been forgiven.

She knew that her great debt had been cancelled by God's grace.

That's the point of the parable, isn't it?

Jesus says there are two debtors, one who owed 500 denarii and one 50.

The debts of both were forgiven by the moneylender.

So Jesus asks Simon, which one would love him more?

Love is the response to the debt forgiven.

And the greater the debt forgiven, the greater the responding love.

There's a point of Greek grammar here that drives this home.

When Jesus says to her: "Your sins are forgiven," that verb is perfect tense.

Perfect tense refers to a past action with continued effect in the present.

So Jesus was not saying, Now, at this moment, after you have anointed my feet, your sins are forgiven. He's declaring to her, for her encouragement, something that has already happened in her life and continues to be true.

That's what I do after the confession of sins in worship.

I say: In Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.

That doesn't mean, right now you're being forgiven.

It means, you've already been forgiven, now take assurance in that.

Then Jesus says, "But he who has been forgiven little, loves little."

Once again takes some care to understand rightly.

Jesus is not saying there are some people so righteous that there is very little for which they need to be forgiven.

Clearly in this parable, Simon is the man who owed 50 and the woman 500.

Does Jesus intend for us to take that literally?

Simon had 10 times fewer sins than woman so only needed 10th the forgiveness?

No, this statement belongs to a whole group of sayings in which he distinguishes between two classes of people according to their conception of themselves.

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Jesus doesn't mean there are some people who are actually righteous,

that's their conception of themselves. They are self-righteous.

Now here's the thing that makes this so hard in Simon's case.

If you had asked him if he was a sinner, he would have given the correct biblical and theological answer.

Most self-righteous people don't.

They might admit to doing some bad things but they always say:

Deep down, I'm a good person.

Simon probably wouldn't have said that. He was a Pharisee, knew the Scriptures.

Would have quoted Psalms: There is no one righteous, not even one.

I'm in need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

But he didn't really believe that about himself because he didn't feel the terrible weight of his guilt and sinfulness.

He didn't feel moved by the amazing love and grace of God.

He didn't understand who Jesus was or why he needed him.

And because of that, his affection and emotions were untouched.

Salvation just wasn't a great thing to him like it was to her.

But the Christian faith cannot be accepted with nonchalance.

It's a message of God's mighty intervention to save us at terrible cost to himself.

A great debt has been cancelled that we could never pay.

The heart that knows that is always moved.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!

And when the greatness of sin and salvation fills you with love for Jesus, self-righteousness is demolished, and love flows out to other people.

So how on earth do we accomplish this?

How on earth do we feel deep grief for our sins and gratitude for the amazing grace of God that then blooms into love for Christ and for other people?

We can't. We can no more create those feeling as movements in our soul than a baby can cause himself to be conceived and born.

There's a line in Joseph Hart's hymn, *Come, Ye Sinners*, that we've sung many times.

The first two stanzas say: Come, ye sinners. Come, ye needy.

And then the third stanza starts this way:

Let not conscience make you linger, Nor of fitness fondly dream;

In other words, don't wait to come to Christ until you've cleaned up your act.
Don't dream of getting your life together and then coming to God.

All the fitness He requireth Is to feel your need of Him:
All that God wants, all he requires is that you feel that you need him,
need his forgiveness and grace.
But where do you get that feeling of need for Christ?

This He gives you, this He gives you, 'Tis the Spirit's rising beam.

He gives it to you. It's a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.

So you'll never see yourself rightly without the Holy Spirit.

You'll never overcome your self-righteousness without the Holy Spirit.

You'll never feel your need for Jesus and love Jesus without the Holy Spirit.

And you'll never love people as you should, especially obviously sinful people
without the Holy Spirit.

We need the Holy Spirit. The Spirit speaks and works through the Word.

Maybe you're the woman in this story, and Jesus affirmation what you need.

Maybe you're Simon, and you need to let Jesus' honest words have way with you.

In either case, O Holy Spirit, fill us with gratitude and love for what Jesus has
done, and change us into more loving, affirming, honest people.