

WHO IS WORTHY - HOLINESS VIA HUMILITY

Luke 7:36-50

Leo Douma

04/03/2018



The story is told of a church member who was given recognition by his congregation for being the humblest man in that church. So, they gave him a pin to wear. The following Sunday he wore it to church. But the leadership took the pin off him because he looked proud wearing his pin. Humility is like that. As soon as you recognize your humility you subtly become proud of it. There goes your humility. Here's another example of when you think you are something, you are not. A book on how to manage change in a church said, 'In our success is the seed of our failure'. The concept is that churches have high points in their history when things went very well. But when the culture changes and the church still sticks doggedly to its past successful ways, it will fail to relate to the new situation. That is, it will fail because it sticks to its past success. You think you have it, but you don't. Here is something else to be careful of. We all would agree that as Christians we should strive to live differently to express our thanks to Jesus. But we need to be so careful our attempts to be more like Jesus, don't just become a middle-class decency. We must be careful that in our success is not also the seed of our failure. You see it's so easy for Christians to fall for the twin sister of 'holiness', which is the look alike called 'respectability'. How can we tell if we are truly holy, expressing our love for God? Or we are subtly sliding into 'respectability' and the snobbery that inevitably goes with it? Andrew Murray in his book 'Humility' quotes 1 John 4:20 *"If anyone boasts 'I love God' and goes on hating his brother or sister thinking nothing of it, he is a liar..."* He goes on to write 'What a solemn thought that our love to God will be measured by our everyday fellowship with [one another] ... How solemn that our love to God will be found to be a delusion, except as its truth is proved in standing the test of daily life with our fellow human beings. It is even so with our humility. It is easy to think we humble ourselves before God. Yet humility toward others will be the only sufficient proof that our humility before God is real.'

Where am I going with this? Well respectability and snobbery on the one hand versus humility and deep love for God on the other are central issues in our text. The tension is seen so clearly when we compare the Pharisee and the woman. I want you to carefully note the actions of these two. Picture the scene with me. Simon, the Pharisee has invited Jesus to his home for a meal. That was not out of friendship or a chance to get to know Jesus better. Simon is a Pharisee. He is a highly respectable, religious

person. He has invited Jesus purely out of curiosity. Simon, like other Pharisees wanted to see what all the excitement was about this, so called, 'prophet from Galilee.' How can we tell Simon did not think highly of Jesus? Well, he did not extend to Jesus the usual hospitality given to a guest. As becomes clear later (Luke 7:44-46), there was no freshening up from walking on the dusty roads. There was no washing of the feet or the anointing of Jesus' head with perfumed oil. There was no greeting, the customary kiss. This was standard in greeting guests. But not here with Jesus. You see, the Pharisees were too respectable to be closely associated with Jesus. After all, Jesus was known to be a friend of *"...tax collectors and sinners"*. The word 'sinners' was a euphemism for the worst in polite society like thieves, prostitutes, and the like. Jesus himself said in Luke 7:34 *"The Son of Man came eating and drinking and you say, 'Here is a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners'."* So, no, Jesus was not an honoured guest. But it was an interesting attraction to have Jesus at the meal. The Pharisees with all their knowledge could have fun trying to trip up Jesus. The houses of the wealthy were built in a square around a courtyard. Entertaining was done in the courtyard. Such dinners were often open to the public. The host provided cushions around the perimeter of the courtyard so that uninvited guests could sit and watch and listen. Now, you wonder why Jesus would accept such an invitation where provoking him is the expected entertainment? I'd suggest it's because Jesus is no snob. He wanted everyone to have the opportunity to be saved.

So, imagine the diners reclining at table on low couches. They would lean on their left arm towards the table with their body stretched out behind them. So, there is Jesus, (:36) *"...reclined at the table"*, talking to Simon and the others, when in walks this woman. Luke describes her as (:37) *"...a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town."* Which is a softer way of saying she was a prostitute. We are not given any of her background or why she entered prostitution. We know today at least 80% of those who become prostitutes were sexually abused. It may have been she was a widow with no other way to support herself. Whatever her background she was morally unacceptable. She knew what she did was wrong. We note Luke says she 'had' been. It seems somewhere along the line she had been changed by Jesus. How and when we don't know. But her actions make clear she had been converted. Whatever her current spiritual condition the Pharisees saw her only for what she had been: the town whore! The shame of her life is not forgotten. Her presence at this meal of highly respectable Pharisees was not appreciated. Any decent person could come in and sit on the cushions along the wall. But there were limits. Certainly this 'sinner', this prostitute, was not welcome. She was not worthy to be in the presence of the Pharisees. So, her being there took a lot of courage. She was facing verbal and possible physical abuse.

But there she is with her (:37) *"...alabaster jar of perfume."* She has come to do something very special. To anoint her Lord with this most precious item she has. It is her way of saying thank you to Jesus. But as she knelt at Jesus feet at the end of the couch, she completely loses it. Her emotions overcome her, and she sobs and the tears flow. In Jesus' presence she realizes that she, the 'sinner', the town prostitute, has been forgiven. She is a new person in God's eyes. She is 'clean'. All her past is forgiven. Never again to be held against her. So, her tears flow, and they fall on Jesus' feet. The drops of moisture show up the dust and grime that is still on Jesus' feet. The dust that should already have been washed off. Left there because Simon had not even provided Jesus with the basic hospitality as a host. But the woman undoes her hair and washed Jesus feet with her hair and tears. Then she kissed them. And finally, she anoints his feet with the perfume. The humility of the woman, and her dedication here, are striking in every action. A Jewish woman would never undo her hair in a public place. Kissing the feet was never done. Certainly not the dusty and stinking feet in that arid land. And to put perfume on the feet was unheard of. You put it on a guest's head. Only the lowest of slaves attended a guest's feet. There is obviously deep devotion displayed here.

But Simon the Pharisee did not see it that way. He saw the town prostitute making a disgusting fool of herself. And creating an embarrassing scene for the respectable people he was hosting. The whole situation disgusted him. And not just the woman. Jesus too! 'Why is he just laying there and taking it? And he is supposed to be a prophet?' Look at Luke 7:39 Simon *"...said to himself 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of a woman she is- that she is a sinner'"*. The scene reinforced Simon's attitude. 'This Jesus is a fraud. A disgrace. He hangs out with these types and is no different to them. I'm glad I gave the welcome I did. He doesn't deserve to be treated as a guest of mine. A self-respecting man of God would not allow a prostitute to blubber at his feet. He would kick her with those feet and throw her out!' Here is Simon, the highly religious, respectable Pharisee looking down his nose in disdain at Jesus. His religious 'holiness' has become self-righteous arrogance. It strikes us that Simon had not seen what the woman had seen. That Jesus had come to save the lost. Here is God humbling himself, in human form, to bring grace and mercy. Simon rashly concluded that Jesus could not distinguish between the 'worthy' and 'unworthy'.

Yet Jesus knew very well what was going on. To Jesus it was the woman who was worthy before God. And Simon who was unworthy. Jesus makes the point abundantly clear to Simon. First, he gets his attention. (:40) *"Simon, I have something to tell you."* Our NIV translation says Simon responded, *"Tell me, teacher."* That's a bit neutral. The reply is more of a disinterested, sarcastic reply 'Go on, rabbi. Tell me O prophet who has no

clue what kind of person is touching you.' Jesus tells him a little parable (41 & 42). *"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"* The answer is obvious. But Simon is hesitant. *"I suppose the one who had the bigger debt."* Now, what is Jesus driving at? Well, Jesus is comparing Simon with the woman. He says in effect, 'Let's suppose, Simon, that the sin God pardoned you of was little. Let's assume you are a decent and respectable person. An upright Pharisee! Your sin would be miniscule of course. And let us admit that the woman was guilty of much wrong. We all know she was the town prostitute. But she also has been forgiven. Agreed? Now, the one who has been forgiven more will love more, right? So, can't you see that what she has done is her expression of love and gratitude? Can't you see her actions bear witness to the forgiveness she has experienced from God? What else is the meaning of her tears and kisses? It was a confession of her great guilt. But now her utter joy that she has found the grace of God! (:47) *"Therefore, I tell you, her sins have been forgiven- for she loved much."* Her forgiveness is evidenced by the fact that she expressed her love so deeply.

Simon thought he was right with God. After all he was such an upstanding citizen. A religious leader. But his lack of love, no water, no kiss of greeting, no ointment for Jesus, indicated he was nothing more than an arrogant religious snob. He was self-righteous, but not right with God. He had rejected his own God in his midst. Simon may have been 'decent and respectable'. And she may have been a 'cheap loose woman'. Yet she is the one who received from Jesus the joyous reassurance (:48&50) *"Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you. Go in peace"*! What wonderful words! We too can hear those words of Jesus. 'You are forgiven. Go in Peace.' Not by parading our decency. But by admitting our sin and our need for Jesus.

I suggest, one of the reasons the church lost ground in Western culture is that Christianity had become 'church-ianity. In other words, an insipid middle-class decency that showed little passion for Jesus and his mission to make disciples. It is an attitude that confuses respectability with genuine holiness and Christ-likeness. Christianity is often criticized for being morally arrogant, do-gooders who think they are better than others and telling others how to behave. A bunch of moralizers who keep at arm's length those whose morals are loose. What is required for the church to regain respect is a deep passion for Jesus. A passion that is generated by utter joy at God's grace. A recognition that we are no better than anyone else, including the drunk in the gutter and the despised sexual abuser. Yet by God's mercy we are the children of God! It is a passion for Jesus that expresses itself in genuine care and love for others. It is a passion that can say to those who come to Hope on Friday, 'We do this because we

love you. We love you because we love Jesus'. Again, as Murray put it 'How solemn that our love to God will be found to be a delusion, except as its truth is proved in standing the test of daily life with our fellow human beings.'

When we come forward in a moment to participate in the Lord's Supper, we are not showing each other how good we are. We are not saying we are worthy to come forward. We are admitting we are like the woman in our text. All of us are completely unworthy before God, no matter how decent we are. It is only when we come before God in utter humility and recognize the depth of our sin, that we truly participate in our Lord's sacrament. For this Supper of our Lord is the reminder of all Jesus has done on the cross, for the forgiveness of all our sins. Recognizing our sin, increases our passion and love for Jesus. And it helps us grow in humility. It reduces the likelihood we will look down our noses at others as if we are better. Humility helps us reach out to the rich and the arrogant, to the battler and the addict, because we see ourselves in them, sinners whose only hope is Jesus. Deep love for Jesus drives holiness. Arrogance drive respectability. Just staying respectable we are still lost. But the humble who come to Jesus hear the words "*Go in peace*".