

Potomac Hills Community Church

Rev. David V. Silvernail, Jr.

May 27, 2001

The Power to Repent

“Revealed Grace” - a series from Luke
Luke 7:36-50

INTRODUCTION: *A Bold Sinner*

Everyone once in a while our lives are confronted by that person whom I'll call a “bold sinner.” Someone who relishes living in total opposition to everything God says. Someone who enjoys persecuting Christians. Someone who is totally self-centered that they don't even see anything wrong with their selfish actions. Someone whose conscience has been so seared by continual, repeated sin that they no longer are able to realize the effects of their actions.

We've all met this type of person.

And sometimes you wonder ...

What would it take to convince this person to change?

What would it take to break through the rock-hard shell they've built around their heart?

There are times when nothing other than a face-to-face encounter with the overpowering Truth of the Lord Jesus Christ is able to break the hardened heart.

There are times when nothing other than the overwhelming Grace given by God's Son is able to reach the conscience, which has sat idle day after day.

And in today's passage at the end of Luke 7, we're given the rare privilege of being witnesses to the confrontation that occurs when a person such as I have described collides with the overpowering Truth and overwhelming Grace of Christ.

What happens when the Bold Sinner meets the Brave Savior?

This is one of the stories of Jesus that we've read or heard lots of times.

So much so, for some of us, that we don't pay a lot of attention to it.

But I want you to listen to it again, carefully ...

Luke 7:36-50

“One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to come to his home for a meal, so Jesus accepted the invitation and sat down to eat. [37] A certain immoral woman heard He was there and brought a beautiful jar filled with expensive perfume. [38] Then she knelt behind Him at His feet, weeping. Her tears fell on His feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing His feet and putting perfume on them.

[39] *When the Pharisee who was the host saw what was happening and who the woman was, he said to himself, "This proves that Jesus is no prophet. If God had really sent Him, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!"*

[40] *Then Jesus spoke up and answered his thoughts. "Simon," he said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you."*

"All right, Teacher," Simon replied, "go ahead."

[41] *Then Jesus told him this story: "A man loaned money to two people - five hundred pieces of silver to one and fifty pieces to the other. [42] But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?"*

[43] *Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt."*

"That's right," Jesus said. [44] Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer Me water to wash the dust from My feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. [45] You didn't give Me a kiss of greeting, but she has kissed My feet again and again from the time I first came in. [46] You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint My head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. [47] I tell you, her sins - and they are many - have been forgiven, so she has shown Me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love." [48] Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven."

[49] *The men at the table said among themselves, "Who does this man think He is, going around forgiving sins?"*

[50] *And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."*

• **Encountering Christ**¹

She is a prostitute. Her evenings are spent standing on a street corner, soliciting business; her mornings are spent sleeping in, nursing hangovers.

She drinks with her customers to get her through the evening. She drinks alone when they have gone. Until at last, she drinks herself to sleep. For her, wine isn't a beverage; it's a painkiller. It makes her numb. And numb is the best she can hope to feel.

It is dusk and once again she pours herself a drink. She lies a moment on her bed and stares at the ceiling, her thoughts mingling with the perfume that fills her room. She wonders how many times she has lain there desperately wanting to be loved and wanted and needed ... but realizing that the reality is that she's only

¹ Adapted from *Moments with the Savior* by Ken Gire, pages 139-144. A few parts have been adapted from *Hitchhiking on Hope Street* by Mike Warnke and *The Man Nobody Knows* by Bruce Barton.

wanted for one thing, and only needed for one night, and never loved at all.

She sighs, as she gets ready for another night.

Around her neck she puts a necklace from which hangs a small, alabaster jar of perfume. She fixes her hair, drapes a tawdry scarf over her shoulders, smears some color onto her face, and puts on a pair of spangled earrings.

She goes out to her customary corner, where she takes the vial of perfume and dabs a little on her neck. She has met all manner of men on this corner, from shopkeepers to those who tax them to those who take their tithes.

They say they want to stay with her, but they are soon gone.

Men, they're all alike.

Or so she thinks until she meets Jesus.

She meets Him on His way to a dinner engagement. As He approaches her corner, she's counting on her perfume to lure Him. In case it doesn't, she brushes a hand against her earrings to catch His eye.

But His eyes don't look at her. They look through her.

They look past the spangles and scarves to see what it is that brings her to this street corner night after night.

She feels His eyes go past the contours of her body and press hard against the hollow contours of her soul, and in uncharacteristic modesty, without thinking, she pulls a scarf over her face.

He speaks to her, and in a moment she realizes that He must be a prophet.

How else could He discern her shame?

How else could He know her secret longings?

He tells her that the love she longs for is not on that street corner.

He tells her about a love so pure it can wash away all her sin, no matter how unsightly the stain or how permanent it may seem on the surface.

It is the love of God.

And it is hers for the asking.

She listens in veiled silence. After a few more words Jesus leaves for His appointment. In His absence she drops her veil. A spade of conscience digs at her heart. She grasps at her heart, but all she feels is the cold alabaster jar of perfume.

The thought that anyone could love her like that ... let alone God ... overpowers her. She falls to her knees, right there on her corner, pleading for this forgiveness, begging to know this love.

She gets up, disoriented, and runs down the street. She grabs people to ask if they've seen Jesus, if they know where He went. She scours the streets and alleys, but the night seems to have enveloped Him. After an anxious half hour of searching, she finds someone who thinks he saw Jesus go to Simon's house.

She arrives at the Pharisee's house, breathless, her heart beating against her ribs like a suddenly caged bird.

From the open doorway she sees soft mats bordering a low table where guests are reclining, propped on their elbows. The servants are busy filling goblets and replenishing trays of food, so she's able to slip into the room unnoticed.

She approaches the table reverently and stops at the feet of Him who is now her Savior.

Suddenly, everybody's attention turns to her ...

"Look what the cat dragged in ..."

"A sinner in Simon's house ..."

"This ought to be interesting ..."

She has everyone's attention now. But only one man has her attention.

She is looking down ... at His feet. Now she notices that these aren't the feet of a rich man, they don't have on the sandals of a rich man. No, they were the feet of a Nazarene carpenter. Not the feet of a man who had spent time everyday being pampered and perfumed in the Roman baths. These were calloused feet, these were sunburned feet, these were the dusty feet, these were the feet of a man who walked miles and miles out of His way one time just to put His arms around a Samaritan woman and tell her everything was going to be okay.

Then she looked at the hem of His garment (it wasn't Brooks Brothers or Calvin Klien), it was homespun and kind of frayed at the edge.

She looked at His cloak and His cloak was no better.

She looked at His physique, and I don't believe His physique was that much better than average. Besides, in her profession, what's one more physique, more or less?

Then she looked up at His face. Josephus the historian says that He looked like every other Nazarene, which means He was a Mediterranean Jew, probably with an olive complexion. He had black hair. It was probably curly. He had a black beard, because that was the style at the time. I don't know if His hair was long or short. It doesn't matter. But when she looked into His eyes, she realized that she wasn't just looking into the eyes of another Galilean Jew, another itinerant preacher. She was looking into the eyes of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the fairest of ten thousand.

Self-consciously she clutches the small alabaster jar dangling from her neck, then collapses, sobbing in a heap of scarves. She buries her face in the Savior's feet, showering them with the love that spills from her eyes.

Simon sits up. It's an awkward moment for the host.

He knows this women's reputation.

And if Jesus really were a prophet, He would know it too.

And if Jesus really were a righteous man, He would certainly send her away with a good scolding.

But Jesus neither scolds nor sends her away.

Wiping her eyes, the woman sees the mess her tears have made as they've mixed with the dust on His feet. She lets down her hair to clean them and dry them. As she does, she kisses His feet.

Hair that was once used to seduce is now used to serve.

Kisses that were once for sale are now given away freely.

Then, as if to cleanse Jesus from her unworthy kisses, she opens her alabaster jar of perfume and pours the sweet fragrance over His feet.

The scent fills the room and thoughts run through Simon's mind so fast they almost trip over themselves ... "How scandalous. How can Jesus let her carry on that way? Doesn't He know who she is?"

Jesus proves Himself to be a prophet, not by discerning the morals of the woman but by discerning the mind of the host. He clears up the confusion in Simon's mind with a parable.

"A man loaned money to two people - five hundred pieces of silver to one and fifty pieces to the other. [42] But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?"

[43] Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt."

"That's right," Jesus said. [44] Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer Me water to wash the dust from My feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. [45] You didn't give Me a kiss of greeting, but she has kissed My feet again and again from the time I first came in. [46] You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint My head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume."

The forgiveness that has been lavished on this woman is evidenced by the love she has lavished on Jesus. Tears, hair, kisses, perfume.

Tokens of her love.

Testimonies of her forgiveness.

This woman of the night found in the Savior what she could never find on the street corner. Forgiveness for her sins. Salvation for her soul. Peace for her heart. And the love that she so desperately longed for. Love that would be with her not just for the night ... but forever.

Now she was still a bold sinner, but now she had a broken heart and a repentant soul, which were totally focused on Jesus. And so she comes to a place where she is completely forgiven, totally accepted, and deeply loved ... a new creation, complete in Christ.

But there is another character in this story. A character that is very different from this bold sinner. And that's ...

- **Simon the Pharisee**²

If you were looking for someone who was 180° different from the sinful woman, you couldn't go far wrong picking Simon the Pharisee.

Simon wasn't poor; he had money and property.

He didn't consider himself a sinner; he was properly self-righteous.

He wasn't at the bottom of the social ladder; he was one of the guys who kept the ladder in place.

He didn't know people like this unclean woman; he kept the law.

And because he was so focused on keeping the law, so proud of his legal righteousness, his legalism that he was totally unable to love this woman.

His self-righteousness put a huge distance between him and the woman.

Not only was he judgmental towards the woman, he was judgmental towards Jesus for not showing the legal righteousness, the legalism, that Simon expected.

And so his self-righteousness put a huge distance between him and Jesus.

He was so secure and confident in his own righteousness that he didn't even realize he was a sinner. He was, you might say, a **Benign** sinner. He has a disease that he doesn't even know about, and if he did, wouldn't think it was much of a problem. He believes his sin is benign, it's not a problem, it's nothing to worry about, thank you very much.

And so, the question is, which one are we?

Are we the bold sinner or the benign sinner?

Do we admit our sin, even if it would mean others would find out about it?

Or do we pretend our sin isn't serious; it's nothing to worry about?

Only you can answer that question for yourself, but I tend to think most of us are a lot more like Simon than the Sinful woman.

We create some sort of legal righteousness, some legalism, for them to meet that keeps us from loving them. Like Simon we pile on the burdens instead of carrying the burdens. We would rather **look like** we care about people instead of actually caring about them.

We don't think we're that bad; in fact, we think we're pretty good.

And our self-righteousness puts a huge distance between us and Jesus.

We become judgmental of sinful people.

- **Jesus loved them**³

It's pretty obvious from the text that Jesus loved this woman. He loved her, accepted her, and forgave her. He saved her from her sins. Very few of us would doubt Jesus' overwhelming love for this sinful woman.

2 Some parts of the next two sections have been adapted from "The Power to Love," a message by Drew Angus, World Harvest Mission, given at the Potomac Hills officer retreat, June 24, 2000.

3 Several parts of this section have been adapted from The Ragamuffin Gospel by Brennan Manning, pages 20-22, 77, 136, 197-198.

But Jesus loved Simon the Pharisee as well.

He knew Simon and his sin as well as He knew this woman and her sin.

And Jesus dramatically loved Simon.

For starters, He allowed Simon to see this woman's display of love.

You see, Simon only pretended to believe he was a sinner. He didn't actually think he was one, but you couldn't come out and say that in polite company. But people who pretend to believe they're sinners also pretend to believe they're forgiven. They don't really feel forgiven because they don't really feel they need to be forgiven. And people who pretend to be forgiven pretend to love the forgiver. They don't really love Him because they don't really believe He's forgiven them.

So Simon is polite, he's nice, he's hospitable, he's generous ... but he does not love. He has no reason to love. He doesn't know what real, overflowing love looks like. So Jesus shows him. With this woman.

You know, years ago, nobody talked about being born again, even in the Deep South. A hundred years ago, when people wanted to describe the conversion experience, the moment of coming to Christ, the experience of breaking through to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, they said,

"I was seized by the power of a great affection."

This woman was seized by the power of a great affection. Simon was not.

Second, Jesus told Simon a very simple story to illustrate this woman's love.

It wasn't long, it wasn't complicated. It was short and to the point.

"Who loves more? The one who's been forgiven a lot, or the one who's been forgiven a little?" She's been forgiven much, so she loves much.

Which leaves you, Simon, as one who's been forgiven little, and so you love little. Perhaps there's more that you need to be forgiven of?

And with this little story, Jesus confronts Simon's need of forgiveness. He exposes the root of Simon's sin. Simon thought he was a benign sinner, he didn't need a whole of forgiveness, he was a master of legal righteousness.

But here, Jesus is saying, in effect, the Kingdom of God is not a subdivision for the self-righteous. The Kingdom of God is not about being in an exclusive, well-trimmed development with a snobby HMA with a bunch of snobby rules about who can live there. The Gospel of God's Grace is for the less self-conscious who know they are sinners, who know they have moral struggles, who know they don't deserve the love of God, but get it anyway.

The Good News means that we can stop lying to ourselves. The sweet sound of amazing grace saves us from the necessity of self-deception. It keeps us from denying that though Christ was victorious, the battle with lust, greed, and pride still rages within us.

As a sinner who's been redeemed, I can acknowledge that I'm often

unloving, irritable, angry, and resentful with those around me. When I come to church I can leave my white hat at home, and admit I've failed. God not only loves me as I am, but also knows me as I am. Because of this I don't need to apply spiritual cosmetics to make myself presentable. I can accept ownership of my poverty and powerlessness and neediness.

We can become as honest as the 92 year-old priest who was venerated by everyone in town. He was a member of the Rotary Club. And every time the club met, he would be there, on time, and seated in his favorite chair. And then one day he disappeared. People searched all over for him, but couldn't find him. But then Rotary met, and he was there sitting in his favorite chair.

"Father," they cried, "where have you been?"

"I just finished a short stay in prison."

"Prison! You wouldn't hurt a fly, what happened?"

"Well," the old priest started, "It's a long story, but I bought a train ticket to go to the city. I was standing on the platform waiting for the train to arrive when this stunningly beautiful girl appears on the arm of a policeman. She looked at me, turned to the cop, and said, "He did it. I'm certain he's the one."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was so flattered I pleaded guilty."

Being honest means being willing to admit our dishonesty.

And finally, Jesus loved Simon so much that He showed His divinity by answering Simon's thoughts, and in so doing, Jesus risked Simon's rejection. And when Jesus comes to us, offering forgiveness, He does so at the risk of our rejection. Bold sinners don't reject forgiveness, benign sinners do.

And the Gospel declares that no matter how dutiful, how prayerful, how benign we are, we can't save ourselves. What Jesus did was sufficient. To the extent that we are self-made saints like the Pharisee, we let the prostitutes and the publicans go first into the Kingdom, while we are in the background having our alleged virtue burnt out of us. The hookers, lepers, and tax collectors go first because they know they cannot save themselves and they cannot make themselves presentable or lovable. They risked everything on Jesus, and knowing they didn't have it altogether, weren't too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace.

Every parable of mercy in the Gospel was addressed by Jesus to His opponents: murmuring scribes and grumbling Pharisees. They have become the enemies of grace, indignant because Jesus asserts that God cares about sinners, incensed that He eats with people they despise.

And what is He telling them?

It is these sinners, these people you despise, who are nearer to God than you.

It's not the hookers and thieves who find it difficult to repent; it's you who are so secure in piety and pretense that you have no need of forgiveness. These others may have disobeyed God, their professions may have debased them, but

they've shown sorrow and repentance. And more than that, they appreciate God's goodness: they enter the Kingdom before you for they have what you lack ... a deep gratitude for God's love and a deep wonder at His mercy.

CONCLUSION: *Another Sinful Woman.*

Next weekend the officers are going on a retreat.

We go on one every year.

It's a time of great spiritual intensity ... we went tubing on the Potomac.

And we had a great time and got good and wet and tired.

And then climbed back on the bus to go home.

And another group came in behind us.

One member of this group was a woman.

She was wearing a bikini.

A very small bikini.

A very small bikini that almost matched the color of her skin.

I have handkerchiefs that have more material than this woman's bikini.

Now, lest you think that we all fell into lust, let me say that this was a large woman. Maybe more accurately described as a wide woman. She was no taller than me. She was several of me wide. Flesh everywhere.

We all dutifully averted our eyes and looked at each other and rolled our eyes and endured the ride back with this unseemly woman.

After supper, our speaker, Drew Angus from World Harvest Mission, opened the Scriptures to us. He spoke on "The Power To Love" and opened to Luke 7 and read this very passage.

He asked us if we knew who this woman was?

And then he said, "Did you see that woman on the bus?"

"That was this woman!"

It felt like he had taken a knife and thrust it into my hurt.

And then he said, "Did we treat her like Jesus did?"

"Or did we treat her like Simon did?"

And every one of us knew that we were Simon.

We had been judgmental and self-righteous and now we needed forgiveness.

And God brought Drew to point that out to us.

And God brought Jesus to point that out to Simon.

It is a story Luke wants us to remember.

Because there are no benign sinners in the Kingdom of God.

Martin Luther once said, "Love God and Sin Boldly."

I think he must have been reading Luke.

Because Luke wants us to see that the Jesus story is not only about Him, but also about us. These texts **reveal** God at work; and shows us how God **reveals His power** in order to call people who know they are big sinners to be forgiven and to

“Come, be My disciple.”

God takes people who are “outsiders,” **and who can’t get in on their own**, and makes them “insiders” ... people who are involved **in a relationship** with the God of the universe. People who are called to live a life that looks to God because He has **poured out His grace** on those of us who realize that we’re big sinners who don’t deserve His love, or His forgiveness, or His grace.

And yet, He gives them to us anyways.

And that’s grace, because we’re getting what we don’t deserve.

Luke brings us that same essential message of grace over and over again.

We see it in Jesus’ teaching.

We see it in Jesus’ healing.

We see it when He casts out demons.

We see it with lepers and paralytics.

We see it when He calls undeserving people.

We see it when He teaches the Twelve.

We see it with a Roman Centurion and a brokenhearted widow.

We see it with a doubting prophet at the end of his life.

We see it with a sinful woman and a self-righteous Pharisee.

It’s all of grace from beginning to end ... that’s the message.

Luke tells the story of how **Jesus revealed that grace**, died to provide it, rose again to bestow it, and will return to establish its presence over all of creation. The church **must show** what **such grace looks like** ... starting by bringing that grace to those among us who desperately want to be loved.

And to us, Jesus says, “*Go ... and tell ... what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.*

‘God blesses those who are not offended by Me.’ ”

And all those willing to admit we need this grace said, “Amen.”

Dear Lord,

Forgive us for all the times we have prostituted our lives.

For how we have attracted attention to ourselves.

For how we have compromised our character.

For how we have cheapened our lives and the lives of others.

O Lord, our sins are great.

Forgive us for all the times we have been the Pharisee.

For when we've judged someone's heart by the clothes they had on.

For when we've looked down on someone who was worshipping You in a way that was different from our way.

For all the tearless times when we merely entertain Your presence.

O Lord, our sins are great.

Forgive us, for the sins we've committed, which, like the woman's, are many.

Forgive us the opportunities to serve You that we've neglected, which, like the Pharisee's, are also many.

O Lord, our sins are great.

O Lord, help us to realize the extent of our sins so we may appreciate the extent of Your grace in canceling them, and because we've been forgiven much, become able to love much.

O Lord, help us to understand that when You said, "***I have come to call sinners to turn from their sins, not to spend My time with those who think they are already good enough...***" that we are the sinners who need to repent.

Amen, and Amen.