

“The Mercy Controversy”

Luke 7:36-50

Series: Kingdom Come Week 1. Surrender All

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Every country maintains border security for entry. Now in the time of Covid, these procedures are even more stringent. Take for example what you must go through to enter one land. The total number allowed in is severely limited. You have to make a reservation and purchase a ticket. You go through the usual airport style security and are digitally finger printed. Your bags are searched and any dangerous items such as flags, banners, balloons or plastic straws are confiscated. You undergo a touchless temperature check and if anyone in your group is 100.4 Fahrenheit or above you are all refused entry. That’s what it takes to get in this kingdom. Which kingdom? The Magic Kingdom at Disney World.

Now more than, ever it is difficult, almost impossible, to enter any country. Over the years I’ve been asked by members of Woodside to write letters for their applications to be granted Green Cards or Citizenship by the United States. From what they tell me, it is an arduous, expensive and time consuming process. My point is not to enter the debate on immigration. Rather, it is to raise a question: What does it take to enter and become a citizen of the Kingdom of God?

The core of Jesus’ message is the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. He begins, “The time has come,” he said. “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” Mark 1:15

“I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” Luke 4:43

Even the prayer He taught His disciples to pray includes, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:10

Parables are the primary way Jesus teaches about this Kingdom. He says in Mark 4:30, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?” Jesus’ parables are simple stories with profound meanings. Children easily grasp them and scholars endlessly study them. From what we know, Jesus is the first rabbi to teach with parables. They are so unique to the Lord that one of the great NT scholars says, “We stand right before Jesus when reading his parable.”¹ In this time of uncertainty, anxiety and fear, we need to stand on solid ground. The Rock-solid message of Jesus is the Kingdom of God. It’s not a place or a political party. It’s a people who follow a King. It comforts those who face challenges and challenges those who feel too comfortable. This Kingdom is unlike any other in history. The Kingdom of God is not like the Kingdom of Sweden or Great Britain. It has no borders. It has no capital city. It is not limited to one race or ethnic group. The Kingdom of heaven is not just in heaven. It’s not something which comes only after you die. It is now. It is near. It is here. This fall, we’ll unlock the secrets of the Kingdom and discover how His Kingdom comes and His will is done in us.

¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1972) p.12.

You can live as a citizen of the Kingdom of heaven while you live among the kingdoms of earth. Many of you know Jim and Darlene Stevens. Recently Jim and Darlene celebrated the 50th anniversary of their wedding. Now you may also know that Darlene is a citizen of Canada. For five decades she has lived in the United States as a citizen of another country. The technical term for this is a resident alien. So it's true. Darlene is an alien. In the late 70s when Robin Williams played an alien on *Mork and Mindy*, Darlene's kids became concerned that she was that kind of alien. She once told me she did not like the movie *Independence Day* in which Americans fight off space invaders. I told her, "That's because you're on the side of the aliens."

The truth is: all followers of Jesus are like Darlene – we are resident aliens. This fall, the parables will teach us how to live as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven while we live here on earth. The parable of the Two Debtors, tells us how to *enter* the Kingdom of heaven. It pops up at a dinner party which turns out to be a trap. The host of the banquet, Simon, is a Pharisee. The Pharisees hold a different view from Jesus of how to live as a Kingdom citizen. At this party, Simon hopes to prove Jesus' views on Kingdom entry are really heresy. Let's see what happens.

We enter the home of Simon and notice there are other uninvited persons standing against the wall. It is common in the Middle East for town folk to gather at a special meal even if they are not invited guests. The table is richly set and cushions are scattered around it. Dinner guests do not sit, they recline on their sides, faces toward the table, legs pointing away like spokes of a wheel radiating from the hub. There is excitement in the air because everyone knows the new rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, will be the guest of honor at this feast. Finally Simon, the host, enters the room to welcome the invited guests with the customary greeting: a kiss on the cheek for equals, a kiss on the hand for highly honored guests. Servants quickly approach and wash the dusty road from their feet and anoint their heads with olive oil. The guests then lie on the cushions around the table. Simon carefully oversees every detail to make sure all the required rituals of hospitality are observed.

Finally Jesus arrives. Simon approaches him, yet fails to greet Jesus with a kiss. The servants waiting to wash the dirt off the Rabbi's feet are motioned away and there is no one to anoint his head with oil. Simon only stiffly says, "Welcome, teacher." Astonishment spreads across the faces as Simon clearly breaks the required rules of hospitality. It would be as if a host, in preCovid days, invites you to their home and fails to shake your hand, take your coat, offer you something to drink or point the way to the dinner table.

The meaning of this socially awkward moment is not lost on anyone. This whole scene is a carefully staged insult. Jesus is not a guest of honor at a banquet. He is a defendant on trial. He is the main course. His ministry is about to be served up to a jury of critics. As steaming dishes of food are laid out, the questions and accusations steam up. "Why do you heal on the Sabbath? It is against the Law." "Who gave you the authority to forgive sins?" "Where did you get this power to perform miracles?" Jesus calmly answers each one. But as the accusations and table pounding rise to a fevered pitch it is suddenly cut short...by the presence of a woman.

This is not just any woman. Beneath her makeup and perfume, we can see a face worn and wearied by years of abuse, brokenness and betrayal. Everyone in the room knows she is a street walker by trade and therefore, a sinner. She has no right to be here. And yet there is something different about her: a strange radiance, a new joy, a brighter, lighter expression. Earlier that day,

Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God near her street corner. He spoke of a God who binds up broken hearts, a God who welcomes home the lost, a God who sets prisoners free, a God who never tires of forgiving and giving you a new start. A God of mercy. His words touch her life and lift the burden of sin and shame she has carried so many years. Mercy has found her and freed her.

Now she walks over and stands near Jesus' feet. Having witnessed Simon's insulting treatment of his guest, she resolves to show respect to the Rabbi. All eyes fix on her. As she kneels down at her Master's feet, tears roll down her face. Tears of relief, tears of gratitude, tears of inexpressible joy, a burst dam of pent up emotion bathe Jesus' feet. With no towel, she throws caution to the wind. An audible gasp ripples through the room as she lets down her hair to wipe away the tears and dirt. In the Middle East it is scandalous for any woman to do this in public. It is reserved for a husband in the bedroom. Yet this is not the end. The woman then smothers Jesus' feet with kisses. Finally, she takes an alabaster flask of expensive perfume, a tools of her trade, and, in a gesture of surrender, empties the bottle on Jesus' feet.

As the powerful fragrance fills the atmosphere, the deafening silence in the room is thick with shock and outrage. Simon thinks to himself, "This man is no prophet! He permits this filthy woman to perform perverse acts on him. He can't even look into her soul and see she is a great sinner" Jesus can read the woman's thoughts. He can also read Simon's. Turning to his host, Jesus says, "Simon, I want to tell you a story." "Speak up, 'Teacher,'" comes the biting reply.

Two people 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 forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? Luke 7:41-42

There is a pause. Simon is smart enough to know when he is cornered. His response is hesitant, uncertain. He says, "Well, I suppose, perhaps the one who is forgiven more, will love him more." "You're correct," Jesus congratulates him and then turning to the tear stained face of the woman. "Look at her Simon. Do you actually see her? I entered *your* house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair. You gave me no kiss of greeting, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. Therefore I tell you, because she knows her many sins are forgiven, her debt canceled by God, she pours out great love; but," turning to face Simon, "he who thinks he only needs a little forgiveness, gives little love away."

Simon is caught in his own trap. While the woman kisses Jesus' feet, Simon stands with his foot in his mouth. Jesus and the Pharisees have two radically different views on how one enters God's Kingdom. For the Pharisees, you obey God's Law to the letter, you prove you are worthy, you live a nearly sinless life. Then God will declare you righteous and admit you to His Kingdom. In this parable, Jesus says everyone is in debt to God. No one can earn their way in. Not by your personal piety, your Biblical brilliance or your resume of righteous acts. Like the woman, you enter the Kingdom by an act of surrender, a humble acceptance of God's forgiveness. God does not wait for us to earn our entrance. He knows we are unworthy. He admits us by His mercy and grace. Do you want to receive God's forgiveness and enter His Kingdom? Ask yourselves these three questions.

Do You Know You Need Mercy? The gift of forgiveness is always waiting for you, but do you know you need it? The main difference between the woman and Simon is not the amount of sin in their lives, but their openness to God's gift. The woman knows she needs God. She admits she is a sinner. She is wearied by the weight of her sins. They control her, imprison her. She knows God's mercy is the only key which sets her free.

Simon, on the other hand, is a do-it-yourselfer. He succeeds by his own power. He has achieved a level of honor, holiness, and purity. He feels he does not need much help or forgiveness from God. He only has a few sins, a small debt, maybe fifty bucks. And what's fifty bucks to God? Do you know any Simons? They say, "I'm not really that bad. I lead a good life without ever setting foot in a sanctuary." Some Simons are quick to point out the real sinners, those who really need forgiveness. They judge others. I bet you can think of a few Simons. Maybe you can point them out. If you can...welcome to the Simon club. We all need God's forgiveness. God forgives all debts large or small. Mercy is offered to all. But to receive it, you must know you need it.

Secondly, **Do You Bow to Receive Mercy?** When the woman bows to kiss Jesus' feet she isn't groveling. She is giving up her old way of life. She shows this when she anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume. This expensive fragrance is a tool of her trade. To close the door on those dark days, she pours out the costly cologne as a sign of the change in her life. Her most prized possession is laid at the feet of Jesus. The heavy fragrance in the air proclaims to everyone her body and life now belong to God.

Simon, on the other hand, stands back with folded arms, judging scowl and hardened heart. He does not think he needs forgiveness and he is unwilling to change his life. He insults, criticizes, rejects the woman and Jesus. In so doing, he rejects the gift of forgiveness. Are you willing to bow down to the Lord, to change your way of life, to give up something precious and costly which blocks your relationship with Christ? Will you bow to mercy?

And finally, **Do You Show Mercy?** Jesus says those who are forgiven much, love much. We see the stark contrast between the joyous outpouring of love from this humble woman and the cold calculation of this prideful man. The forgiven are forgiving. The merci-full fill others up with mercy. They can never forget their greater debt is already forgiven. So much of God's love pours in the floodgates of their lives it can't help but overflow to others. You cannot truly be touched by God's forgiveness, without also turning and forgiving others.

The entrance to God's Kingdom stands wide open. There are no security checks, border guards, x ray machines, complicated forms or immigration officials. You do not have to prove you are worthy. The price for your entrance is already paid. The question is, "What from your old life are you still clutching which you must let go? What's in your alabaster jar? Are you willing to pour it out at Jesus' feet?"