

Meals with Jesus

Dining with a Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 12, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ Last week we kicked off a new sermon series that we're calling *Meals with Jesus*. We'll be preaching out of the Gospel of Luke, exploring the themes of hospitality and table fellowship. Last Sunday, we pointed out how this pandemic experience has disrupted our usual practice of hosting and fellowshiping with each other over a meal. It's impeded our ability to practice hospitality.
 - **This morning, I want to build on this idea of the pandemic being a disruption to the normal rhythms of our lives – the usual ebb and flow.** This has occurred on both a personal and congregational level. **Personally, many of us have fallen out of sync with our spiritual disciplines.** Perhaps we had been utilizing our commute to listen to an audio bible or to spend time in quiet prayer or contemplation. But once we started working from home, that rhythm got disrupted. There are so many other examples of how our personal devotional lives have fallen out of sync.
 - **And on a congregational level, we were always accustomed to a weekly rhythm of gathering together as the worshipping people of God.** But for so long we were kept apart – and even still many of our fellow church members are not present but watching online. I'm sure they have good reasons with conditions still so severe, but you can't tell me that all of these disruptions to our life together as the church hasn't resulted in negative effects.

- ❖ **One of those detrimental effects would be spiritual apathy.** It's safe to say that many of us have been dealing with apathy or spiritual lukewarmness. We still believe in God. We haven't rejected Christ or his gospel. We haven't quit the church or abandoned all spiritual practices. We still give the bare minimum that devotion requires. But let's be honest – **our love has grown cold.** Our hearts are lukewarm towards Christ and his gospel. That's spiritual apathy. We did a whole series through the book of Malachi last spring with that very theme in mind.
 - This morning's text has a lot to say about spiritual apathy. **Now once again, like last week, Jesus sits down and shares a meal with sinners.** In Luke 5, he shared table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. It was a scandalous decision to dine with Levi and his tax collector friends. This week however, in Luke 7, Jesus is dining with Simon the Pharisee and his Pharisee friends. This time it was a respectable home with respectable persons around the table. Nothing scandalous here. Because no one back then would've considered that to be a meal with sinners.

- ❖ But that's the irony that needs to be noted. **The banquet with Simon in Luke 7 is as much a "meal with sinners" as the feast with Levi in Luke 5.** Those meals should be considered equally scandalous. But they're not – because religious people tend to have an overinflated view of their own righteousness. **They don't recognize themselves as great sinners in need of great forgiveness, which is the underlying root cause of spiritual apathy.**
 - It takes a physician of the soul to figure that out, and that's what we have in Christ. In last week's passage, Jesus self-consciously identified as a physician. He says he came for the sick, for sinners plagued by sin. He came to bring a cure, to bring forgiveness.

- ❖ This morning we're going to consider another meal between Jesus and sinners. The Great Physician will do his job and help us to accomplish three tasks: (1) To diagnose an apathetic heart, (2) To discover its root cause, and (3) To determine an effective treatment.

Diagnosing an Apathetic Heart

- ❖ Let's begin by diagnosing an apathetic heart. This is important because we want to be able to recognize if our hearts were to grow cold and apathetic. We can start by looking at the two characters who encounter Jesus at a dinner banquet. **The first is Simon the Pharisee.** He's the host. This is his house. Now there is nothing in the text to suggest that Simon had a sinister motive in inviting Jesus over for a meal. In fact, compared to other Pharisees in Luke's Gospel, Simon seems genuinely interested in Jesus – though a bit skeptical.
 - **The other character is introduced as “*a woman of the city, who was a sinner*”.** We're not given more details, but many have suspected that she was a prostitute. We don't know her name or background. All we know is that she's a woman with a scandalous past who heard about Jesus; and how welcoming he is towards sinners; and how he preaches good news for people like her. And she's compelled to find him.
- ❖ **What we're presented with here in these two contrasting characters are two contrasting responses that we can have towards Jesus.** Both Simon and the woman are in his presence. Both show interest in him. Both listen to what he has to say. Yet only one leaves with a heart filled with love and peace, secure in Jesus's forgiveness. While the other is left with a heart that is still cold and spiritually apathetic towards Christ.
 - **What made the difference between these two characters?** That's the most urgent question for each and every one of us right now. Because we're all in the presence of Christ. He is here with us in this sanctuary. All of us are listening to his teaching. And I assume all of us have some inkling of interest in him. **So by the end of this service, everyone will go away from Jesus's presence either like Simon or like this woman. Which one will you be?**
- ❖ Now when diagnosing an apathetic heart, there are two telltale signs that are noticeable in Simon's response to Jesus and the woman. Here's the first sign: **Someone with an apathetic heart is content with giving the bare minimum that devotion requires.**
 - That's the attitude where you only give God what you have to. You won't go beyond the call of duty. You see this in Simon's treatment of Jesus as a guest in his house, especially when contrasted later against this woman of the city.
- ❖ **According to ancient standards of hospitality, it was customary for a host to prepare a formal banquet when entertaining a guest of honor, which is what Simon did.** He did exactly what was expected of him. Now had he asked a servant to wash Jesus's feet, or if he had kissed Jesus on the cheek, or anointed his head with oil – that would've been a welcomed gesture. It would have expressed great affection for his guest. But Simon was under no obligation to provide any of that. **According to the customs of his day, he did what a host had to do.** He gave the bare minimum that hospitality requires. No more; no less.

- So when Jesus calls him out in vv44-46, take note that he's not accusing Simon of discourtesy. He's not calling him a bad host. **But Jesus is diagnosing Simon's apathetic heart – a heart that is content with just giving the bare minimum that devotion requires.** No more; no less.

- ❖ **Now notice how Simon's bare minimum devotion stands in stark contrast to this woman's unrestrained, extravagant devotion towards Christ.** She arrives with the intent of anointing Jesus's feet with her "*alabaster flask of ointment.*" (v37)
 - You need to know something about this ointment. **First, it's not what you would normally use to anoint dinner guests.** A host would usually use inexpensive olive oil (*elaion*), which Jesus mentions in v46 as something Simon didn't offer. But the word for ointment (*myron*) in v37, suggests that her flask contained a costly perfume.

- ❖ **Second, she would have spent all of this ointment on Jesus.** An "*alabaster flask*" was a vial worn typically around your neck. It had a long-neck itself – that you would have to break to access the ointment. That means once opened, you have to use all of it. So she wasn't planning on just using a couple of drops. Her intent was to spend it all on Jesus.
 - **Third, if she was a prostitute, the ointment would have been used in her profession.** But here she is. This woman of the city is so transformed by her encounter with Christ, that she is ready and willing to transform the tools of her wicked trade into a righteous offering of worship.

- ❖ **Friends, this woman represents those who have personally experienced Christ in a real and powerful way. While Simon, on the other hand, represents those who have merely experienced religion.** People like Simon have hearts that are cold and apathetic and content with giving the bare minimum. Just what's required of them. *I should go to church?* Check. *I should read my Bible?* Check. *I should give to the Lord?* Check.
 - "I'll even invite Jesus into my life. I'll treat him kindly and politely listen. **But there are limits to how much I'll give.** I won't go overboard like some people who recklessly abandon everything. That's too much." That's what an apathetic heart says. That's the attitude you'll find among those who treat Christianity as a mere religion.

- ❖ **But those who have experienced Jesus (like this woman did) discover – not a mere religion – but a powerful relationship.** Your dead heart comes alive and is filled with so much love because you realize how unworthy you are to come to him in the first place.
 - So when you do come, you tend to bring everything – all your sin, all your shame, all your time and treasures – and you pour them out at his feet. That is how a great love for Jesus expresses itself.

- ❖ Now that leads to another telltale sign: **Someone with an apathetic heart tends to be suspicious of any displays of great love for Jesus.** I see this in vv38-39. Here we read of how the woman's plan to properly anoint Jesus' feet unravels into an emotional mess and how Simon reacts to her unrestrained, extravagant gestures.

- ❖ Start at v38 and try to imagine the scene. This woman has entered the banquet. She's made her way to Jesus's feet. But before she can pour the flask, she's overwhelmed and begins to weep uncontrollably. **The term used to describe her weeping is used elsewhere in the NT for rain showers** (Mt 5:45). So this is not a mere whimper. She's bawling at his feet!
 - Once she notices the mess she's making with her tears, she lets her hair down to wipe dry Jesus' feet. Now, in those days, it was considered immodest for a woman to unbind her hair in public. But at this point she is unconcerned with social proprieties.
 - And then she begins to kiss his feet! In those days, feet were one of the dirtiest parts of the body. That's why washing feet was a job given to the lowliest of servants. So imagine kissing them!
 - **Do you see this woman's great love for Jesus – as evidenced by her unrestrained, extravagant gestures?** She's overwhelmed to the point that she could care less what others might think.

- ❖ **Now contrast that with Simon's little love for Jesus.** He can't identify with what this woman is feeling and expressing. So he writes her off as a fanatic. **All Simon knew was little love and what little love looks like when expressed.**
 - So instead of admiring or emulating her great love, he judged it to be shameful. But there is nothing shameful, nothing fanatical, nothing abnormal about this woman's great love and how she expresses it with tears and great displays of emotions.

- ❖ Now you might be thinking, "Does this mean if I'm not experiencing emotional reactions to Jesus or his gospel, if I'm not weeping when I think about him or what he's done for me – does that mean something's wrong? Has my love grown cold? Do I have an apathetic heart?"
 - Well maybe. But maybe not. Looking for tears is *not* the point. Weeping is not *the* indicator. **Weeping is just one of many ways to express a great love for Jesus.** It's not even a clear sign. Your tears could be from the flesh and not a heart overwhelmed with love for Jesus. We shouldn't make tears the true measure of one's love.

- ❖ When I finally understood this, it was so liberating. Because personally, I'm not a very emotional guy. I can only recall one or two times that I've really wept in my adult life. **So I used to wonder if something was wrong with me when I didn't express the same emotions for God that I witnessed in some of my peers.**
 - One of my mentors – who was also my pastor at the time – would frequently be moved to tears when he preached. When he got to the part of his sermon where he spoke of the gospel and what Christ did for us sinners in his death and resurrection. I didn't do that when I preached. I still don't. And I used to feel bad about that.

- ❖ But when I realized that I was making too much out of the weeping itself – it was liberating. **I came to understand that we're all wired differently.** So we shouldn't gauge our love for Jesus by measuring ourselves to others – including this woman in Luke 7. Some people are more expressive in their emotions than others. **The question is not how greatly you show your love for Jesus – but whether that love is little or great.**

- ❖ And the best way to gauge that is to measure your love – not against others – but against yourself. **Compare your love for Jesus to your love for other people, possessions, or pursuits in life.** Is your love for Jesus great in comparison to these?
 - I need to ask myself: Do the emotions I display for Jesus match or exceed the emotions I display for my family members? For the Astros – when they win a game with a walk-off home run? **I have to measure my love for Jesus against other people or things in life that I know I love.** That’s the real test.
- ❖ How are you doing? If I observed you for a week and just listened to what you talk about, if I took note of what you read or watched or listened to or what you invested your time and energy into – would I be able to draw an unquestionable conclusion that you love Jesus?
 - There might be big tears and big emotions involved – or maybe not. **But when measured against yourself, is your love for Jesus big or small?** That’s the question.

Discovering its Root Cause

- ❖ Now perhaps some of you are feeling exposed. Like Simon, the spiritual apathy that has gripped your heart is becoming more apparent. *What do I do? How do you treat an apathetic heart?* **Well, before we can answer that, we need to discover the root cause of apathy.** This leads to our second point. Now there’s likely a multitude of factors that contribute to your heart growing cold. But like any good physician, Jesus focuses on the root cause. And he helps us discover the root cause of our apathy by means of a parable.
- ❖ Let’s start back up in v40. **Here Jesus tells a parable about two debtors who both owned a certain moneylender.** One debtor’s debt was ten times larger than the others. One owed 500 denarii, which was worth about 20 months wages, and the other owed 50 denarii, which was worth 2 months wages. **But since neither of them were able to pay back their debts, the moneylender graciously cancelled both.**
 - Jesus then turns to Simon and asks, “*Now which of the debtors will love [the moneylender] more?*” Simon answers, “*The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.*” To which Jesus replies, “*You have judged rightly.*” (vv42-43)
- ❖ And then in vv44-46, **Jesus goes for the jugular and exposes the apathy that has gripped Simon’s heart.** Jesus shows how this woman’s hospitality outshines Simon’s. Now again, no one would have considered him rude for not providing these courtesies. There was no obligation. **But his inaction stands out when compared to this woman who went beyond the call of duty in expressing her love for Jesus.**
 - So we come to v47 – the key verse that explains how a heart turns cold and apathetic. “*Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.*” Here Jesus makes clear that Simon is the man in the parable with the little debt who is forgiven little, and this sinful woman is the one with the great debt who is forgiven greatly.

- ❖ Now notice how Jesus is not denying that – from a human perspective – Simon is more righteous than this woman. Her sins *are* far more glaring. **Her debt to God truly is bigger. But the greatness of her debt does not disqualify her from forgiveness.**
 - In fact, it’s the greatness of her debt that explains why she behaved with such a great display of emotion. **Her extravagant love for Jesus sprang forth from her experience of an extravagant forgiveness by Jesus!** *“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much.”*

- ❖ Now at first glance you might read v47 and draw the conclusion that this woman was forgiven *for* (as in *because*) she loved much. That would suggest that our forgiveness is based on the measure of our love for Christ. More love for Jesus results in more forgiveness from him. But that would be a contradiction of the gospel of grace! Forgiveness would no longer be a free gift. It *would* be a result of works – something you earned (cf. Eph 2:8-9).
 - But that’s not what Jesus is teaching in v47. **He’s saying this woman’s great love for him was not the cause of her forgiveness but rather the evidence of her having been forgiven.** Look at our passage in its context. Look at v35 right before our text. It says, *“Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”* Now there Jesus is addressing the very criticism that he is unwisely associating himself with tax collectors and sinners – sharing table fellowship with them.

- ❖ He’s pointing us to the results of his ministry to sinners – that they are responding to the good news with repentance (v22). **The wisdom in fellowshiping with sinners is justified by all her children – that is, by what those actions bear forth.** They serve as evidence.
 - So in the same way, this woman in our passage is justified *“by all her children”* – that is, by what her actions towards Jesus bear forth. They serve as evidence that she has been forgiven, and still is in a state of forgiveness.

- ❖ Now contrast that with Simon’s apathy towards Jesus, which is explained by the fact that he has been forgiven little. As Jesus puts it, *“He who is forgiven little, loves little.”* “Simon, you’re content with showing bare minimum hospitality – giving me bare minimum devotion – because you love me little, and the reason you love me little is because you’ve been forgiven little. You can’t fathom why this woman would behave in this way because you can’t fathom her experience of such a great forgiveness.” **So that’s what Jesus identifies as the root cause of Simon’s spiritual apathy – his experience of little forgiveness.**
 - Friends, that would apply to us as well. I’m sure we could point to a number of factors that have contributed to our apathy. Like we said, the pandemic-related disruptions to the normal rhythms of our lives haven’t helped. The stress and busyness of your studies or job or whatever is going on at home could all be factors. **But the underlying root cause of our spiritual apathy is little forgiveness – an inability to relate to the great forgiveness this woman has experienced.**

Determining an Effective Treatment

- ❖ Now if that's a right diagnosis, then perhaps the prescribed treatment is to go and rack up a huge debt before God – so like the bigger debtor or like the woman in our story, we can experience a greater forgiveness! That seems to be the takeaway. Want to turn around an apathetic heart? **Then be like this woman, go out and sin greatly, and then come to Jesus to experience a greater forgiveness that will generate within you a greater love!**
 - That makes sense, right? How many of us, growing up in youth group, used to envy the youth retreat speaker who had that powerful testimony of how he use to be in a gang, how he did drugs, how he committed crimes. But then, by the grace of God, he became a Christian and now a pastor! And all church kids used to think, “Wow, I wish I had a testimony like that. Mine is so boring.”

- ❖ It's common for those who grew up in the faith to be somewhat envious of great sinners who became Christians later in life – because they always seem to have a greater love for Jesus. **But should we sin more *in order to* experience more forgiveness *in order to* love Jesus more?** By no means! That's the devil's logic.
 - That is *not* an effective treatment for an apathetic heart. That's *not* what the Great Physician would prescribe. This leads to our third point/task – **to determine an effective treatment for spiritual apathy.**

- ❖ **The gospel treatment for an apathetic heart is for God to give you a new one.** To replace your heart of stone with a beating heart of flesh. Which will supply you with new eyes of the heart that enables you to finally see the reality of your sinfulness. That, like this woman in our story, you too are a sinner in need of a great forgiveness.
 - **Simon's problem was that he was too focused on the differences between him and this woman of the city.** He was too focused on how much smaller his debt was compared to hers. Like between the two debtors in Jesus's parable.

- ❖ But the parable is not about the size of your debt. Yes, there is a difference between the two debtors, between Simon and the woman. **But what's more important is what they share in common – the fact that neither one could pay off their debt, regardless of its size.**
 - So no matter the size of your sin debt before God, we are all spiritually impoverished. We're all spiritually bankrupt, meaning we are unable to pay off *even a cent*. **So the most morally upright person you know stands equally condemned and in need of forgiveness as much as the worst of sinners.**

- ❖ **To wish you had lived a life of great sinfulness before conversion means you've yet to grasp your own capacity to sin.** You fail to see your own sinfulness. I remember hearing a pastor share his testimony of how he was saved from a life of hard crime, drug use, and violence – all at the ripe age of six! He meant that even though he was saved at six years old, he was still saved from that extraordinary life of sin. **Because the pastor was so in tune with his sinfulness, he knew, if not for the grace of God, he would've turned out to be that great of a sinner.**

- ❖ That's what Simon needed to see. He's a great sinner, and he needs Jesus's forgiveness as badly as this woman. But he's blinded to these realities. **That's why he *thinks* he has little need for forgiveness, and thus he has little love for the Forgiver.**
 - So if the root cause of our apathetic hearts is a perception that we need little forgiveness – and if the effective treatment is for you to get a new heart with new eyes of the heart that can see the gravity of your sin and the greatness of your Savior – then where do you get this new heart? What do you do?

- ❖ **Friends, you get that new heart by first looking to the cross.** Look at the horrible cross – this cruel, brutal instrument of torture and death. Stare at it long enough and what does it tell you? **It tells us that our sins are so vile and offensive that the only way to wash us clean was for God the Son to be nailed to that horrible cross.** We are that bad off. Nothing we do can wash us clean. If there was another option, don't you think God the Father would've taken it? But the cross was the only way – because our sins are just that sinful.
 - **But now keep your eyes on the cross, and focus now on the Savior who was nailed to it.** *Who is this man?* In v48, the guests ask this same question when Jesus told the woman her sins were forgiven. “*Who is this, who even forgives sins?*” Every Jew in those days knew that only God can forgive sin (Lk 5:21). So who is this Jesus claiming to be?

- ❖ **This Jesus is the Savior who lived the life you should have lived. Who took all your debt upon himself. So he could die the death you deserved to die.** Friends, you contribute nothing in this exchange. You don't pay a thing. You freely receive God's forgiveness in Christ by faith alone.
 - Just as Jesus told the woman in v50, “*Your faith has saved you; go in peace,*” he speaks the same good news to you. I pray that God gives each of you a new heart with new eyes to see this good news. And I hope each of you leaves here identifying no longer with Simon – but with this woman. **May you go in peace; assured that you've received a great forgiveness; and filled in your heart with a great love for your great Savior!**