

“The Mercy Controversy”

Luke 7:36-50

Series: *The Experiment* Week 5: *Blessed are the Merciful*

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Back in 1999, a rare sensation occurred thirty miles off Cape Cod. For the first time in 47 years, New England fishermen discovered large schools of tuna were running and biting! They were so hungry any amateur angler just needed a sharp hook and some bait. And the rewards were astounding. Rumors circulated about Japanese buyers willing to pay \$50,000 for a large blue-fin. As a result, many small, unequipped boats ignored Coast Guard warnings and headed out to sea. Yet these new fishermen soon discovered they were in over their heads. The problem was not catching a tuna—it was getting them into the boat. On September 23, the *Christi Anne*, a 19-foot boat, capsized while battling a tuna. That same day, the 27-foot boat *Basic Instinct* suffered the same fate. Worst of all, when *Official Business*, a 28-footer, hooked a 600-pound tuna, the fish simply pulled it underwater.

Finally, Charlie the Tuna got his revenge. Who’s sorry now?

In the fifth Beatitude Jesus says,

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Matthew 5:7

Sometimes, when we talk about mercy or forgiveness, we call it “letting someone off the hook.” A friend, a family member, a neighbor, a coworker, an enemy hurts me. So now, in my mind and heart, I’ve got that person on the barbed hook of my anger, bitterness, and resentment. They wounded me. They owe me. They need to make it up to me. I’m justified. I’m right. They must ask for my forgiveness. And I’m not letting them off the hook until they do. Even if they apologize, I’m not sure I’ll let them go. When you have someone hooked on the end of the line, it can be like wrestling with a mammoth tuna.

Here’s the sad truth: as long I wrestle with someone on the hook, as long as I refuse to forgive, I am also hooked. And like a 600 pound tuna, unforgiveness will take me under. Jesus warns us to avoid unforgiveness. Later, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us to pray:

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12)

When we refuse to forgive others, it blocks the flow of God’s forgiveness to us. Jesus even says forgiveness and reconciliation are a higher priority than going to church:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Forgiveness and reconciliation are more important to God than worship and offerings. So if I don’t see you in worship on Sunday it better be because you are out forgiving someone. I can’t have a

close relationship with my Father in heaven if I refuse to forgive and let someone off the hook here on earth.

In the fifth beatitude, we see a “Mercy Cycle.” If you give mercy, you’ll receive mercy. It’s the ancient version of “What goes around comes around.” People who are kind, compassionate and forgiving tend to receive kindness, compassion and forgiveness. That’s not always true with people, but it’s definitely true with God. Now please don’t misunderstand. Jesus is not saying we must be merciful to earn God’s mercy. God starts the mercy cycle. He goes first. He is gracious and merciful. We can’t earn it and we don’t deserve it. Yet He freely lets us off the hook. Once the mercy cycle starts, it’s our turn to give mercy. The more we give out, the more we receive. The question is: are you a pipeline of mercy or a pinhole? When it comes to mercy are you a deluge or just a drip?

In some tougher cases, this may set up a mercy controversy in your mind. You may say, “Jesus, I’m not ready to forgive and let him/her off the hook.” Forgive my Ex who cheated on me? Forgive my children who take and take from me and only give me grief and rejection in return? Forgive my parents who criticized, wounded, ignored, abused me? Forgive my boss who puts me through a living hell in order to make him look good? Forgive my teacher who punishes me for nothing, but lets the favorites get away with murder? You don’t want to let him or her off the hook. Yet this grudge match is taking you under.

So many questions arise in the middle of a Mercy Controversy:

Why show mercy?
Who deserves mercy? Who doesn’t?
How much mercy? When do I stop?
How do I show mercy?

Jesus frequently found Himself in the center of a Mercy Controversy – especially when He tangled with some Pharisees. On one occasion, what looks like an innocent dinner party turns out to be a trap. The host lays out a hook to catch Jesus. His plan is to prove Jesus’ views on mercy are really heresy. Let’s see what happens.

We enter the door of the dining room in the home of a Pharisee named Simon and notice there are other uninvited persons who stand 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 the central table. Dinner guests do not sit, they recline or lay on their stomachs and 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 greet the invited guests. He exudes an air of piety. As each guest enters, he gives 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 down 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 says, "Welcome, teacher," with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. Astonishment spreads across the faces as Simon clearly, and perhaps purposely, breaks the unwritten, yet required rules of hospitality. It would be as if a host invited you to their home and then failed 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. The hook is laid. As the meal begins, so do the questions. As steaming dishes of food are laid out, the accusations start to 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 debate, the accusations, the table pounding, rise to a fevered pitch it is suddenly cut short... by the presence of a woman.

This is not just any woman. Despite her makeup and her perfume, we can see underneath a woman worn and wearied by years of 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 forgives and forgets, 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 touched her life and lifted the burden of sin and shame she has carried so many years. Mercy has found her. Mercy has freed her. Mercy lifted her burdens. Mercy let her off the hook.

Now she walks over and stands behind where Jesus reclines. Having witnessed Simon's insulting refusal to properly welcome his guest, she steps forward to show proper respect to the Rabbi. All eyes are fixed 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 perform such an intimate gesture in public. Yet this is not the end. The woman then smothers Jesus' feet with kisses. Finally, she takes a small flask of very expensive perfume, one of the 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 these perverse acts on him. Can't he even look into this street walker's life and see she is a great sinner?" Oh Jesus can read the woman's thoughts. He can also read Simon's. Yet the Lord does not immediately react to this unspoken attack. Turning to his host, Jesus says, "Simon, I want to tell you a story." "Speak up, 'Teacher,'" comes the biting reply. "A certain money-lender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, the other only fifty. When they could not pay, the lender forgave them both. Now which of them will love the lender more?" There is a pause. Simon is smart enough to know when he'd been cornered. His response is hesitant,

uncertain. He says, "Well, I suppose, well, 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, her burdens gone, she pours out great love; but," turning face to face with Simon, "he who thinks he only needs a little forgiveness, who lets only a morsel of mercy in, gives little love away."

Simon is caught in his own trap. He winds up on the hook. God's mercy uncovers the condition of two hearts. Here are two radically different reactions to Jesus' offer of forgiveness. The woman, in an act of love and thankfulness, humbles herself, takes Jesus' foot to her mouth and kisses it. Simon's carefully planned insult against Jesus backfires leaving the Pharisee with his foot in his mouth. Now be honest, with whom do you identify: the woman or Simon? This story reveals three tests for evaluating our response to God's mercy. Are you blocking the healing power of forgiveness? Do you want to experience God's forgiveness in your life? Then why not take this simple examination?

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. By the sweat of his brow he has achieved a level of status, power, honor, holiness, and purity. And so 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? I've met two types of Simons over the years. There's the "I'm not really that bad" Simon. You will hear this type say, "I lead a good life without ever setting foot in a sanctuary." Some Simons do go to church religiously but they always think the sermon for someone else. And all of them are quick to point out the real sinners, those who really need forgiveness. They stand back and 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.

The other type of Simon is more subtle. This person says, "God will never forgive me. The things I've done are too bad. I've fallen so many times." While this sounds like humility, it's actually false humility. This Simon believes they are so bad even God is not strong enough to forgive. We all need God's forgiveness. Through his parable, Jesus says 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. This is powerfully revealed when she anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume. This expensive fragrance is a tool of her trade. The sweet smell attracts customers. But the woman has closed the door on those dark days. So 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 that her body and her 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, calculating cruelty 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. That's how the Mercy Cycle starts. The more you give out, the more you receive from God.

Sociologist and pastor Tony Campolo, tells the story of how he flew to Hawaii to speak at a Christian Conference. "After all, somebody has to suffer for the Gospel." The jet lag between Philadelphia and Honolulu left him wide awake at three in the morning. So he went out to a greasy all-night diner for a cup of coffee and a donut.

While there, eight or nine provocative boisterous ladies of the evening came and sat at the counter around him. Their talk was loud and crude and Tony was about to escape when one of them asked, "What's the matter Agnes?" one asked the other. "Ah, nothin.' I'm tired of being used and passed from one man to another. There's not a single soul in this world that cares if I live on the street or wind up on a slab. Tomorrow's my birthday and nobody cares." "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? Ya want me to get you and cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?" "Come on!" said Agnes. "Why do you have to be so mean? I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?" She walked out of the shop.

Tony called over the man behind the counter and said, "Does she come in here every night around this time?" "Yeah, I guess, why?" "Well, why don't we surprise her with a cake?" "That's a great idea. I'll make the cake." The whole thing was set and the next morning at 3. Word got out. It was wall to wall ladies and Tony. At 3:30, Agnes came in and everyone shouted, "Surprise!" A cake with a burning candle was brought out and all sang, "Happy Birthday dear Agnes." Tears streamed down her face. When they went to cut it though, she said slowly and softly, "Look Harry, is it all right with you if I... I mean is it okay if I kind of ... what I want to ask you is ... is it okay if I keep the cake a little while? I mean is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's okay. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. "I just live down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home and show it to my mother, Okay? I'll be right back. Honest." She was too choked with tears to say, "Thanks" as she left. When she was gone, Harry at the counter turned to Tony and asked,

"Who are you anyway?" "I'm just a preacher," Tony replied. "A preacher? Really? What kind of church are you from?" With a smile, Tony said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for street walkers at 3 a.m."

Harry waited a moment, then he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Can we be a church like that?