

**The Mercy and Grace of God**  
**Luke 7:36-50**  
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In 1984 twenty-two year Jennifer Thompson identified Ron Cotton as her rapist. [She pointed directly at him in court and told the judge and jury that she was *certain* that this man was her attacker.] [Cotton insisted he was innocent] yet on her testimony, [the jury] sentenced [Cotton] to fifty years in prison. [Everyone thought justice had been served... but they were wrong.] While in prison, [Cotton overheard another inmate, Bobby Pool, telling] a cell-mate that HE had committed the crime.

Cotton won a new trial, but was convicted again, this time for two life sentences. Finally, after eleven years [in 1995], DNA evidence provided the proof he needed. He was found innocent and [Bobby] Poole guilty.

When [Jennifer] Thompson heard the news, she was overcome with guilt and asked to meet with Cotton. She describes the scene as she entered the church where they had agreed to [get together]:

“I started to cry immediately. And I looked at him, and I said, ‘Ron, if I spent every second of every minute of every hour for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn’t come close to how my heart feels. I’m so sorry.’

And Ron just leaned down, he took my hands...and he looked at me, he said, ‘I forgive you... I don’t want you to look over your shoulder. I just want us to be happy and move on in life.’”<sup>1</sup>

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Please open your Bibles to Luke chapter 7. This morning we are tying together two of God’s attributes that we as fallen people are particularly fond of – His Mercy and His Grace. We know well about a wrongfully-accused man who suffered unjustly because of us, and yet instead of revenge and retaliation, He offered us grace.

Luke 7:36-50. Page 731 in your pew Bible.

[Read Luke 7:36-50]

[Pray]

Today we are looking at the words mercy and grace which are similar concepts that are often confused.

But before we look at the difference between them we need to establish a word of context. And that context is “justice”. You see neither mercy nor grace mean anything outside of the concept of justice.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://nephos.wordpress.com/2009/03/09/the-real-story-is-grace-mercy-and-forgiveness/>

Last week we examined God's wrath, which we defined as "*God's anger toward sin acted out in the repayment of suitable vengeance on the guilty sinner.*"<sup>2</sup>

And it is the last part of that sentence which alludes to justice. "The repayment of *suitable* vengeance on the guilty sinner."

What this means is that the punishment must fit the crime – that's justice.

But then we get Romans 3:23 which tells us "all have sinned" and Romans 6:23 which says "the wages of sin is death," death here on earth and eternal death in hell.

But hold on you say, how is that justice! The worst crimes I have committed are telling white lies and occasionally bending the speed limit – how do I deserve death! How could I possibly deserve hell!?

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Here is where most people, including many Christians, misunderstand sin. While sins against people are not equal – some are small like stealing Tiki torches and some are big like murder; sin is sin when it comes to God.

James 2:10 says "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one part, he has become guilty of all."

Here is what this means: Any sin committed against an infinitely holy God, separates us from that God, and the separation between us is infinite no matter how big or small our sin is. Because God is holy He will not, indeed He cannot be with sin. And that is why all sins are equal with God. Whether it is bending the speed limit or murder our choice to sin separates us from God.

And justice says choosing to separate ourselves from God equals death.

In that context let's look briefly at Mercy and Grace.

Mercy as you have heard is "when we don't get the punishment we do deserve." And Grace is when we "do get something positive we don't deserve." And these two words separate Christianity from every other religion. In Christianity God does the work of making our relationship with Him right – and He does this through His mercy and grace.

Nicky Gumble from the Alpha course describes the mercy/grace transaction like this: As sinners, we stand before God condemned. God sees our sin and can not accept us and His justice demands payment. But in His *mercy* He made a way for us by sending Jesus Christ to die in our place, and to take our sin upon Himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/gods-wrath-vengeance-is-mine-i-will-repay-says-the-lord>

While he hung on the cross all of our sin was placed upon Him and He was separated from God. This is why He cried out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”<sup>3</sup> Jesus was facing the wrath and rejection of God that we deserved.

Of course sin couldn't hold Him down and three days later He rose from the dead.

But something else happened in that moment as well. While Jesus had taken our sin we still lacked a right relationship with God. And so, while we didn't deserve it, in His *grace* Jesus clothed us in His righteousness. We got something that we didn't deserve. Now, when God looks at those of us who have put our faith in Him, He sees the righteousness of Jesus and accepts us.

And that is the mercy and grace transaction. Mercy means taking our sin away, and grace means giving us His righteousness. But the one common denominator in all of this is that we don't deserve any of it.

### **Unpacking the text:**

Alright, I want to turn now to our text and unpack what is going on here. In this account Luke gives us a picture of both mercy and grace.

I want to look at the three main characters in the story, a woman known as a sinner, Simon the Pharisee, and Jesus.

1.) Let's start with the woman. Look at verse 37

[Read Luke 7:37-38a]

We know very little about this woman. She isn't named and we don't even know what *kind* of a sinful life she lived. It is likely of course that she was a prostitute, but all we know for sure is that she had a reputation of sinfulness.

And this woman learns that Jesus is at Simon the Pharisee's house and even though she isn't invited, even though she is shunned by people like this, she makes sure she gets into that party.

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Sinners are going to find out that Jesus is in the house friends, and nobody is going to be able to keep them out. How do you feel about that? Simon wasn't so sure.

Now, by way of context, it wasn't uncommon for uninvited guests to join dinner parties in the first century.<sup>4</sup> Often poor people would use venues like these to get food. But what is surprising is that this known sinful woman entered the home of a *Pharisee* to get to Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Matt 27:46

<sup>4</sup> Geldenhuys, Norval “Commentary of the Gospel of Luke” (Eerdman's Pub Co, Grand Rapids), 1972. pg 233.

For anyone who doesn't know the Pharisees were the self-appointed moral police of the first century. So for her to enter this house as a known sinner would have meant putting her impurity on parade. Verse 38 continues

[Read Luke 7:38]

Now there are two things I want to bring out here. The first one is that if you are a person who has come today broken in your spirit. You find yourself longing to cling to the feet of Jesus even though you don't feel worthy of being in the same continent as Him – you may even be a bit ashamed to be here. Then the message Jesus gives this woman is for you.

This woman came to Jesus in a raw way – vulnerable, her weakness on display in front of everyone. But while there were many judgmental eyes on her that day, the eyes that mattered, the eyes of the Saviour had no judgment for her at all. He didn't push her away.

Instead Jesus sees her humble gift of adoration and responds with verse 47.

[Read Luke 7:47a]

But there is another side to this coin. For the rest of us I don't need to tell you that this was a scandalous moment. But just let your imagination run here. Imagine Jesus was *here* speaking at our Spiritual Emphasis week and a woman of questionable morality went up in front of everyone and started kissing His feet and wiping them with her hair in an incredibly intimate show of adoration. How would you feel?

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This story isn't very Baptist at all. In fact, I don't even know of any Pentecostal churches in town that would let someone get away with this. Don't raise your hands, but how many of you would leave the church if something like that happened here? I'm not going to lie; I would be scandalized by this.

And yet this kind of stuff happened around Jesus all the time. He saw the heart behind the action, and it didn't bother Him that everyone around Him was uncomfortable.

Hmm...Ask yourself: "Are my standards of what is acceptable worship higher than Jesus' standards?"

Simon certainly felt that what this un-named woman was doing was not acceptable to God. And yet Jesus accepted it.

I'm going to give us a moment of silence to consider this from both angles. If you are here today and you feel exposed in your sin like this woman take this moment to receive Jesus' acceptance. But for the rest of us who are perhaps more like Simon consider with me "What does acceptable worship look like to me? Would Jesus accept forms of worship that I wouldn't allow to be given to Him?"

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**2.) Ok,** let's dig in a layer deeper now and examine Simon the Pharisee. Look first at verse 36.

[Read Matthew 7:36]

Very interestingly while, like the un-named woman the Pharisee in this story never appears again in Scripture – and yet in verse 40 Jesus names him – Simon. Why? I think the reason he gets named is because really this story is about him. The woman here only provides the stress to bring out the real point in the story – the heart of the Pharisee. And it is here that the scandal of this story speaks loudest.

But consider first Simon's perspective. Verse 36 doesn't look scandalous at all. Simon certainly didn't think it was. Simon was a Pharisee, he never did anything scandalous.

In their day the Pharisees were the righteous people. They were the pastors and religious leaders of the day. They spent their lives in church. If you thought "sinner" or "scandalous" you didn't think Pharisee in the same sentence, because these people made a profession out of not looking anything like sinners.

But of course this is where the scandal of this verse lies. Not on Simon's part, but on Jesus' because of what situations He is willing to put Himself in to be with sinners.

You see Jesus was constantly running up against Pharisees who were trying to get the better of Him; trying to trap Him in his words and ultimately find a reason to kill Him. These outwardly holy men had hateful, hypocritical lying hearts.

And Jesus knew it. And yet Jesus went to Simon's house to eat with him... Do you get it? Jesus risked anything to be around sinners of all kinds.

This is scandalous, but it is scandalous in our favour. For those of us who look like we have our lives perfectly together on the outside, but inside we know we have serious problems with sin – Jesus' offer of a shared meal is mercy. Jesus here gives Simon the chance to come clean. He takes him up on his offer of hospitality and enters his house. And Jesus offers this same acceptance to all of us here. Jesus will come to your house/ even to mine if we ask Him.

The only question remaining was what would Simon make of this visit? Would he repent in humility, or would he hold on to his self-righteousness?

Simon's story continues in verse 39

[Read Luke 7:39]

It's here that we see the heart of the Pharisee. Simon sees this sinner enter his house and... He can't believe His good luck.

You see, while Simon's invitation to dinner seems hospitable we are going to see the truth. In fact this isn't lunch, it's an interrogation that he has laid out especially to trap Jesus, and at this point in the story it's working. Jesus appears clueless.

Imagine the scene. From where Simon is sitting at the head of the table he can easily see the entrance to his front door. All his guests have arrived and are reclining leaning on their elbows with their feet sticking out behind them at the customary low tables.

Everything is going as planned. Simon wanted to see what all the hype was about. Perhaps if he was lucky Jesus would put on a show, and if not, perhaps something Jesus would say could be used against Him.

Of course Simon didn't plan on the woman showing up, but she has just brought the bait to his trap. As she moves in through the door Simon is at first surprised by her boldness – he knows that she knows that he knows that she is a sinner. But he also knows that Jesus has a soft spot for people like this – this is perfect!

The woman carefully avoids eye-contact with Simon and moves across the room crouching down at Jesus' feet. Jesus appears clueless and Simon can't believe how easy this is going to be, everyone will believe him now. A smug smile creeps onto his lips, here is all the evidence he needs – Jesus is no prophet, if He were He would know what kind of a woman this was and He wouldn't tolerate her actions.

This is Simon's story. This is his house, he is in the position of power and Jesus is falling directly into his trap.

But then we get verse 40... Hmm maybe not. Maybe there is another plan going on here. Maybe this is Jesus' story after all. Look at verse 40.

[Read Luke 7:40a]

In the following exchange Jesus gives us a clue about who He really is and it all starts with Jesus answering Simon's thoughts... Does Jesus ever answer your thoughts? Hmm

And He gives Simon this story. Verse 41.

[Read Luke 7:41-43]

Of course it is no mystery who the two servants are, one is Simon and the other is the woman.

But then Jesus takes this one step farther. Not only does He know Simon's thoughts, but he knows the story behind the both Simon and the woman.

You see, both of these people, the sinful woman and Simon had encountered Jesus before. Now neither of these accounts are recorded in scripture, but from Jesus' words here we can figure out what happened.

Notice Jesus' careful wording in verse 42. It reads "so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" The debts get canceled first and then love is given in response.

When Simon encountered Jesus before this story Jesus had said or done something that spoke mercy to Simon. Maybe there was a debate in the square between Pharisees and Jesus stood up for him. We don't know, but regardless Simon felt obliged to invite Jesus for dinner. That was his response.

But with the woman it is a different story. When she encountered Jesus He forgave her sins and she had lots of them. Maybe this is the woman from John chapter 8 who was caught in the act of adultery and was about to be stoned, again we don't really know. But we do know this, her act in the story today is her response to Jesus' forgiveness.

And now Jesus tells them how He figured this out in verse 44.

[Read Luke 7:44-46]

Jesus is nobody's fool. In the first century all the things Jesus mentions here; the water to wash His feet, the kiss of greeting, the oil for His head. All of these things were customary ways to treat a guest of honour in your house.

Simon does none of them very deliberately because to him Jesus isn't a guest of honour. Simon doesn't feel he needs anything Jesus has to offer. To him Jesus is a troublemaker to be trapped. And he sees Jesus' action of not refusing the sinful woman as all the evidence he needs.

But Jesus won't be trapped, not in this instance, because He isn't guilty of the sin Simon is charging Him with. In fact the woman who has anointed His feet isn't a sinner at all – not any more – she has been forgiven. And so in verse 47 He sets the record straight.

[Read Luke 7:47]

Jesus doesn't say this for the sake of the woman – she has already heard these words. He says them for the sake of the righteous-looking men standing around. "her many sins have already been forgiven" – they are gone.

And the evidence for this is the fact that unlike Simon she has loved much like verse 42 said.

And this is mercy and grace. Mercy occurred days back when this woman first encountered Jesus and He saw her humble heart and forgave her.

She didn't deserve this. Sin deserves punishment, but in Jesus she found someone who was willing to take her punishment for her – Mercy.

But Jesus didn't just take her sin away, He gave her something on top of this. In today's story He associated Himself with her; God in human flesh says, "this woman is with me", and by accepting her He associated His righteousness with her. If you want to attack this woman, you go through me – that's Grace.

Justice demands payment, but in mercy Jesus takes sin and in grace He imparts righteousness through acceptance.

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Jennifer Thompson's statement stole 11 years of an innocent man's life. She convinced herself and the jury that she was ***absolutely certain*** Ron Cotton was the man who raped her, even when the second trial brought Bobby Pool into the equation. She refused to admit she might be wrong.

But Ron proved to be a big man. When he was vindicated, instead of pushing for revenge for the slander Jennifer had given him he forgave her. He deserved to be compensated by her, but he let it go. That's mercy, but the story goes on.

Jennifer and Ron now speak on the phone about once a week, their families are friends and they have a shared bond that most people can't imagine.

Ron granted her a future without guilt – as his friend.

Recently they co-authored a book, titled *Picking Cotton*, with the hope that their story will inform and inspire others.

And now, when asked whose face she sees when she thinks of that dreadful night all those years ago Jennifer responds: and I quote

"That to me is one of the most beautiful things, I don't have a face. Bobby Poole's dead... He died in prison. And Ron Cotton[ - he] is my friend."<sup>5</sup>

The mercy of forgiveness, and the grace of acceptance.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560\\_162-4848039.html?pageNum=6&tag=contentMain;contentBody](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560_162-4848039.html?pageNum=6&tag=contentMain;contentBody)