

Sermon: *Faith and Grace*
Text: *Luke 7:36 – 50*
Date: *June 13, 2010 AM*
Place: *Jesup First UMC*

One day, a pastor was walking down the sidewalk when he was approached by a prostitute. Now, she didn't know he was a pastor; she didn't even know he was a Christian, but when he walked by, she saw somebody that just might be able to help her. You see, her life was a mess. She was sick; she was homeless; she was addicted to drugs; and she had a two-year-old daughter that she couldn't afford to take care of. Well, the pastor was horrified by her story, but he tried not to let it show. And in the midst of their conversation, he asked her: *"Have you ever gone to the church for help?"* She looked at him in amazement, and without hesitation, said: *"Church? Why would I ever go there? They'd just make me feel even worse than I already do."*

Not long ago, a young couple came to my office. They were hurting. His hours had been cut; she had just had a baby and couldn't go back to work yet. Their electric bill was due and they had no money and no groceries in the house. And I looked down and saw that they were members of one of the churches in town, so I asked: *"Has your pastor helped you?"* And she said: *"Pastor, we can't let anybody at our church know about this. They'd never look at us the same again."*

One day, Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon. And as they were eating, a woman came into the room and knelt at Jesus' feet, crying. And Luke tells us she washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. And Simon

was offended; he said to himself: *“If Jesus was a prophet, He’d know what kind of woman this is and He wouldn’t have anything to do with her.”* And Jesus either saw Simon’s expressions of disgust or He knew what Simon was thinking, because He told Simon a story about the extravagant response of those who have received forgiveness. And then, He went the woman away, saying: **“Go, in peace; your faith has saved you.”**

Does this story bother you at all? When I look at this story, I am immediately struck by the contrast between Simon and the woman. Simon was a righteous man, a Pharisee, a leader in the religious community, a man of wealth and privilege and influence, someone people looked up to and hoped their children would imitate. And then, there was this woman, a nameless nobody, whose only description in the text is **“sinner”** which probably means *“prostitute”*. Nobody looked up to her; nobody wanted to imitate her. In fact, it would have been hard to find more than a handful of people who cared anything at all about her.

They were different in almost every way imaginable, especially in the way they responded to Jesus. Now, Simon seems like a good guy. Hey, he even invited Jesus over for dinner, but nothing Simon did that night followed the custom of the day. You see, the custom to greet visitors at the door with a kiss and to either call a slave to wash their feet or to at least give them water to wash their own feet, and sometimes, to offer oil or perfume to freshen up a little. But Simon didn’t do any of that. Simon has

Jesus, the Son of God, sitting at his table, but shows no kindness or hospitality to Him at all. In fact, Jesus said: *“Simon, you gave me no water ... you gave me no kiss ... and you gave me no oil, but this woman ... she has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair ... she has kissed my feet ... and she has put ointment on them too.”*

But it's not until we come to verse 50 that we discover the real source of the contrast. Jesus said to the woman: *“Go in peace; your faith has saved you.”* She was forgiven because she had faith and she expressed her gratitude to Jesus by kneeling at His feet, washing His feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and anointing His feet with ointment.

That's the first point of this story: how do we respond to Jesus? Listen friends, all of our goodness, all of our religious rituals and practices, and all of our good standing in the community will not get us to heaven. *“It is by grace that you are saved through faith and this not of yourselves, even this is a gift of God.”* Paul told the churches of Galatia: *“It doesn't matter if you're circumcised or not circumcised; what matters is that your faith in Jesus Christ demonstrates itself in love.”*

How do we respond to God? In Faith!

But there's a second contrast involved in our text this morning, the contrast between Jesus and Simon. And the basic question here is: How do we respond to sinners? From the moment she entered the house, Simon saw her as an intruder. He knew what kind of woman she was and she was not welcome in his house. He didn't want to be near

her; he didn't even want anything to do with her. It's almost like Simon was afraid that her sinfulness was contagious. But Jesus wasn't bothered by her reputation. He loved her; He welcomed her; He interacted with her; and He forgave her. Simon judged her; Jesus loved her. What a contrast!

How do we respond to sinners? It's really easy to judge, isn't it? There's something about us that really believes we can look one another over and sum one another up in an instant, but many times, we're wrong. One day, a Bishop boarded a ship to sail across the Atlantic and he was shocked to discover that he had been assigned a roommate. Well, he didn't say much. He just went down to his cabin, looked things over, met the young man, and left. Well, he got delayed on his way back to the front desk and by the time he got there, the ship had already cast off. So, he took off his watch and his gold jewelry and gave them to the boarding agent. He said: "*Young man, I'd like you to put these away for safe keeping. I just don't trust my roommate.*" And the agent said: "*Oh, that's perfectly understandable, sir. And don't be ashamed, your roommate just got finished telling me the same thing.*"

This week, John Wooden died. John Wooden was known for many things. He was an outstanding basketball coach at UCLA, but more than that he was a family man, a man of faith, and a man of tremendous influence. A few years ago, when Bobby Knight was in so much trouble at Indiana University, a reporter went to John Wooden for a comment and

Coach Wooden said: *"I think Bob Knight is an outstanding teacher of the game of basketball, but I don't approve of his methods. But ... I'm not a judge, and I'm not judging Bob Knight. There is so much bad in the best of us, and so much good in the worst of us, it hardly behooves me to talk about the rest of us."* There is so much bad in the best of us, and so much good in the worst of us, it hardly behooves me to talk about the rest of us.

For too long, the church has been like Simon: we've seen the stick in other people's eyes, but we can't see the log in our own. When will we welcome sinners instead of turning them away? You see, I think we can either be the church for everybody or we will cease being the church for anybody. We can either gather around God's Word and God's Table as fellow strugglers or we will cease to be gathered at all.

This week, we were told that 2009 was the 14th consecutive year that the South Georgia Conference has declined in membership. I wonder if part of the problem is: our hearts, our minds, and our doors aren't really open. How do we respond to the broken, to the fallen, to the lost and hurting? Jesus responded with grace. He offered grace to Simon; He offered grace to a sinful woman; and He offers grace to you and me.

How do we respond to sinners? With Grace!

It was Communion Sunday and the whole church stared in complete shock. Two men came from two different sides of the church and knelt at the altar together. One was a man who had just been

released from prison after serving 7 years for burglary. The other was the judge who sent him there. After the service, the judge pulled the pastor aside and said: *“Did you notice who was kneeling beside me this morning?”* The pastor said: *“Yes sir, I did, but I didn’t know you noticed.”* The judge said: *“What a miracle of grace!”* The pastor said: *“Yes sir, God really worked wonders in that sinner’s life.”* And the judge said: *“No son! The miracle of grace is that the same God who converted him in prison after years of poverty and struggle converted me after a lifetime of pampering and privilege.”*

Grace, Grace, God’s Grace! Grace that will pardon and cleanse within!

Grace, Grace, God’s Grace! Grace that is greater than all my sin!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!