

“OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL INDIFFERENCE”

Luke 7:36-50

In 1976 I traveled to Israel with a group of Christian friends. While in Nazareth, I purchased an olivewood statue of Jesus. I was fascinated by the intricate detail: the long, flowing hair, beard, and robe; the compassionate face; the sandaled feet; the hands raised in benediction. Of all the souvenirs I brought back from that trip, the olivewood statue of Jesus was my favorite. I told everyone about it. “You have to see this statue. I bought it in Nazareth.” I gave the statue a place of high honor on my office bookshelf, next to my Bibles, commentaries, and concordances.

Over time, however, the scent of the olivewood faded; and so did my interest in the statue. In fact, I seldom noticed the olivewood Jesus any longer, unless cleaning my office. One day, while dusting the statue, I had a terrible thought. How many times had I treated the real Jesus like the olivewood Jesus: ignoring Him until I needed Him; then, figuratively speaking, taking Jesus down, dusting Jesus off, and once my dilemma was solved, returning Jesus to the shelf of my indifference?

Indifference; from the Latin word *indifferentem*, which means ‘not set apart;’ that is, not different, nothing special. Indifference is not rejection. Indifference is neutrality, tepidness, inattentiveness, lack of interest; a ho-hum, take-it-or-leave-it attitude. What causes indifference? Many factors may contribute: passing time, fading appearance, declining value, personal detachment, taking someone or something for granted—a spouse, child, friend; the notion that there will always be another day or another opportunity, when there may not be.

When I purchased a new Ford Mustang in 2002, I was reluctant to drive it for fear of damaging it: chipped paint, cracked windshield, bugs in the grill. I washed the car. I waxed it, I religiously serviced it. And sometimes, I simply stood in the garage admiring it. “Ahhhh.” But when the odometer reached 268,000 miles, I generally ignored the car and the worn knobs and the peanuts beneath the driver’s seat. “Yeah. Whatever. No big deal.” Indifference.

Or consider two newlyweds; so happy, so passionate, so expressive, so communicative, so much in love. “Honey, I love you beyond words. I can’t live without you. You mean everything to me.” Fast-forward their lives thirty years, you may find the same couple sitting indifferently at the breakfast table; noses buried in newspapers; ignoring each other; preferring to communicate in grunts, glares, gripes, and gestures. “You never tell me you love me anymore,” says one. “I told you that thirty years ago,” says the other. “Do I have to keep repeating myself?” The marriage is intact, but the joy and passion are gone. Indifference has set in like hard cement. What happened to “I love you beyond words” and “I can’t live without you”?

Is it possible for Christians to become indifferent to Christ—indifferent to

Scripture, indifferent to church, indifferent to evangelism, indifferent to each other, indifferent even to forgiveness? Sadly, the answer is ‘Yes’. And there are many heartbreaking illustrations of indifference in Scripture. For example, in the Book of Revelation, Jesus admonished two Christian congregations for their spiritual indifference. He said to the church in Ephesus, **“Yet, I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love,”** Revelation 2:4. And to the church in Laodicea He said, **“You are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold,”** Revelation 3:16. The loss of first-love is indifference. Being lukewarm is being indifferent.

And if forgetfulness is sometimes related to indifference—like the expression, “You don’t care enough to remember”—then we can also include the entire history of the Israelites who repeatedly forgot about God; and the nine healed lepers who forgot to thank God; and this lament of God Himself in Jeremiah 2:32, **“Does a maiden forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments? Yet My people have forgotten Me, days without number.”**

Luke 7:36-50 is one of the most endearing accounts in the New Testament; namely, the story of a sinful woman who expressed her love and gratitude for Christ’s forgiveness by washing His feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. But this text is also an important study in overcoming spiritual indifference. For the woman in the text was completely devoted to Christ; while the Pharisee in the text was completely indifferent to Christ. So, what made the difference? What was the difference in the indifference?

The occasion was a banquet, with Simon the Pharisee as the host and Jesus of Nazareth as the guest. No motive is given for Simon’s dinner invitation. Perhaps he was genuinely curious about Jesus. Perhaps he wanted to enhance his own reputation through an association with Jesus. “You’ve heard of Jesus of Nazareth, haven’t you? The miracle-worker. Recently raised the dead son of a widow in Nain. Changed water in wine. Fed thousands from scraps. Controlled weather. Walked on water. Yes, *that* Jesus. I served Him dinner. He came to my house. Has He ever been to your house?”

Or even more likely, knowing how antagonistic many Pharisees were toward Jesus, perhaps Simon was simply looking for a way to discredit Jesus. At the least, Simon the Pharisee was carefully scrutinizing Jesus. This is evident from Simon’s snobbish thought in Luke 7:39, **“If this man were a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”**

Wealthier homes of that era and area were often designed with a courtyard facing the street. When dignitaries attended dinner, the townspeople were permitted to enter the courtyard and politely observe. At first, all went well. But then, a most unwelcome guest entered the courtyard: a **“woman who had lived a sinful life in that town,”** Luke 7:37. A woman who was likely a prostitute. Imagine a prostitute in the home of a prominent Pharisee. Imagine the whispers and sneers and tongue-clicks of

disgust. Imagine the faith and courage required to enter the courtyard and ignore the stares—so great was this woman’s desire to see Jesus.

And rather than to keep her distance—after all, her very presence in the Pharisee’s house was scandalous enough—the woman approached Jesus; who, as custom dictated, was likely reclining on a dining sofa, lying on His left side, supported by pillows, with His legs extended. According to Luke, the woman stood behind Jesus, that is, directly over His feet. And **“weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them,”** Luke 7:38.

And Jesus did nothing. Jesus said nothing. Jesus made no objection. Despite the surprise on some faces and the disgust on others, Jesus allowed this woman to go on wetting His feet with her tears; to go on drying His feet with her hair; to go on kissing His feet and applying expensive perfume. In other words, Jesus compassionately allowed this sinful woman to go on rendering her grateful service to God. And ironically, it was this welcoming acceptance of the woman by Jesus, and not the woman herself, that truly scandalized Simon the Pharisee. **“If this man were a prophet,”** thought Simon, **“He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner,”** Luke 7:39.

At times, we fool ourselves into believing that God only hears what we say, and not what we think. But this is wrong, isn’t it? Not a single syllable or stray thought escapes the omniscience of the Almighty. Notice. In Luke 7:41-43, Jesus addressed what Simon the Pharisee was THINKING, not what Simon was saying.

“Simon,” said Jesus, **“I have something to tell you.”** Simon replied, **“Tell me, Teacher.”** So Jesus offered this parable: **“Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”** Simon answered, **“I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.”** And Jesus said, **“You have judged correctly.”**

For a moment, consider all the striking contrasts in today’s text: a man named Simon and a woman with no name; a proud Pharisee and a penitent prostitute; a wealthy host and an uninvited guest; the town’s best and the town’s worst. But the starkest contrast between these two individuals, the Pharisee and the prostitute, lay in their respective attitudes toward Jesus Christ.

Simon the Pharisee was completely indifferent toward Jesus. Indifferent toward the Savior’s teachings. Indifferent toward extending Jesus the common courtesies of water to wash His dusty feet and a kiss to welcome His arrival. Simon was even indifferent toward answering the question Jesus posed about the two debtors in the parable. **“Now which of them will love him more?”** asked Jesus in Luke 7:42. How

did Simon respond? Across the miles and centuries, his tone of indifference is still unmistakable: **“I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled,”** Luke 7:43.

By contrast, the woman in Luke 7:36-50 was the very opposite of indifference. In her actions she displayed the greatest love, greatest humility, and greatest gratitude. As Jesus explained to Simon in Luke 7:44-46, **“Then He turned toward the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give Me any water for My feet, but she wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing My feet. You did not put oil on My head, but she has poured perfume on My feet.’”**

So, what made the difference? Why was the self-righteous Pharisee indifferent and the sinful woman grateful, humble, and devoted? We don’t have to guess. Jesus Himself provided the answer in Luke 7:47, saying: **“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”** Do we understand? According to Jesus, a person who has been forgiven little, that is, who thinks he has little to forgive—like Simon the Pharisee—will have little love and little gratitude toward God.

What if we find ourselves growing indifferent toward God and His word? There are signs of this, whether blatant or subtle, whether admitted or denied. I’m always fascinated by the magazines displayed near supermarket checkout lines. Magazines with articles like TEN WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP or TEN SIGNS THAT YOUR RELATIONSHIP IS IN TROUBLE. Within a Christian heart, if not in print, shouldn’t there be a headline like this: SIGNS OF TROUBLE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD? Not trouble on His part; but ours. For the Bible states that God remains faithful to us, even when we are unfaithful to Him. **“If we are faithless, He will remain faithful, for He cannot deny Himself,”** 2 Timothy 2:13.

King David wrote in Psalm 84: **“How lovely is Your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere,”** Psalm 84:1-2, 10.

I wonder. Would we say the same about being in God’s house this Sunday? Do we display the same joy, the same yearning, to hear the Scriptures and sing hymns and speak prayers? Do we still communicate frequently with God, knowing that communication is an important part of every relationship, including our relationship with God? Or do we only speak to God when we need Him—figuratively removing Him from the shelf like a certain olivewood statue of Jesus, dusting Him off, then putting Him back until the next problem and the next predicament?

And we can’t rightly say, “Yes, well, I talk to God, but He never talks back to

me.” Yes, He does. Every day, every hour, every minute, every second, God is speaking to us through His holy word, the Bible. The real question is: How willing are we to open our Bibles and to listen to God speak? How then do we overcome spiritual indifference in our lives, our ministries, our marriages, and our churches? On the basis of today’s text, let me offer two brief answers.

First, to overcome spiritual indifference, we must recognize how desperately we all need Jesus Christ as our Savior. Simon the Pharisee was one of Israel’s religious elite. The very name Pharisee meant ‘separated one;’ that is, one better than and superior to all others. Simply recall Christ’s *Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican* in Luke 18; how the Pharisee boasted: **“God, I thank You that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get,”** Luke 18:11-12.

This is how Simon the Pharisee viewed himself; namely, as morally superior to other people. He tithed. He fasted. He gave alms to the poor. He regularly attended worship services at the local synagogue—sat in the front pew, sang the loudest, prayed the hardest. As a Pharisee, he was well versed in the Mosaic Law and perhaps held a Doctorate in Theology.

Above all, he kept himself separate from sinners like the despised tax collectors and the town prostitutes. And somehow, one of them, a sinful woman, had found her way into his dinner party. In his mind, Simon was nothing like that woman. Nothing. Unlike her, he *deserved* God’s love and salvation. And if Simon deserved salvation because of His own works, work, merit, and righteousness, he had absolutely no use for a Savior. He had no need for Jesus Christ.

Only, we can’t save ourselves because all of us are sinners. Imagine the names Simon the Pharisee and other guests at his banquet may have privately called that uninvited woman: “Harlot. Tramp. Trollop. Scum. Homewrecker. Unfit. Unholy.” Yet, dear friends, if God’s Law were to judge us—not only our actions, but our words and our thoughts—what names would it call us?

Is there anyone in church today who has never said a bad word; has never had a bad thought; has never committed a bad deed? Conversely, is there anyone in church today who has always loved God above all things and always loved his neighbor as himself? No. The reality is Psalm 14:3, **“There is no one who does good, not even one.”** The reality is Psalm 51:5, **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”** The reality is Romans 3:23, **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** And therefore we all desperately need Jesus Christ as our Savior. And when we understand this desperate need for Jesus Christ, we will not grow indifferent toward Jesus Christ.

Second, to overcome spiritual indifference, we must also recognize how

much each of us has been forgiven through Jesus Christ. The accusation constantly leveled at Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees—‘This man eats with tax collectors and sinners’—was absolutely true. Jesus did associate with sinners, because Jesus came to save sinners, all sinners, including the town-prostitute who realized this and the self-righteous Pharisee who did not.

Jesus Himself said: **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance,”** Mark 2:17. And in Luke 19:10, **“The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”** And as Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:15, **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”**

Think about that prostitute in today’s text. Her life must have been dreadful. She must have felt so used, despised, worthless, and guilty—until one day, somehow, somewhere, she heard Jesus Christ teaching what He repeated to her at the Pharisee’s banquet: **“Your sins are forgiven,”** Luke 7:48; and **“Your faith has saved you; go in peace,”** Luke 7:50.

After a life like hers and forgiveness like Christ’s, do we really wonder why this woman stood humbly and gratefully at the feet of Jesus; wetting His feet with her tears; drying His feet with her hair; anointing His feet with expensive perfume? Was this woman ever indifferent toward Christ?

“Therefore, I tell you,” said Jesus in Luke 7:42, **“her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”** So, how much have we been forgiven? How much should we love?