

Love's Holy Joy

Loving the Way Jesus Loves

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 13:6

Preached on: Sunday, September 27, 2009

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As you may know, the year 2009 marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the famous reformer whose ministry brought truth and holiness and joy to the city of Geneva. It was my privilege this summer to gather with hundreds of other Christians from around the world to celebrate Calvin's legacy. We were meeting in the San Pierre, the cathedral in which Calvin preached high on the hill overlooking Lake Geneva. We had gathered to celebrate the great truths that Calvin recovered for Switzerland and for the world, the sovereignty of God, the authority and supremacy of Scripture, the doctrine of the grace of God, the grace that we receive by faith in Christ alone and many other great truths of Calvin's reformation.

On the eve of that celebration, the Calvin 500, there was a rather different celebration taking place down on the lake front. It was Geneva's lake parade, 300,000 revelers dancing through the streets. It was not merely lighthearted and fun, but often raucous and rebellious. Alcohol flowed freely, intoxication led to public indecency both gay and straight. And the morning after there was trash everywhere and lying in the trash the prone forms of partiers too messed up to make their way home.

The contrast between the two celebrations was stark. One centered on God and, I believe, ultimately leaving people better equipped to face the difficulties of a fallen world. The other centered on personal pleasure in leaving people empty and alone.

In fact, as I jogged along the lakefront the next morning with the sun sparkling on the water, I saw a young man with bloodshot eyes absolutely yelling into his cell phone at the top of his voice, I think, because his friends had left him behind the night before and he wanted to know where they were.

What will you choose to celebrate and where will it leave you in life? And let me add this question. When you see other people making what you believe to be the wrong choice, are you happy for the opportunity to feel morally superior or are you broken hearted by sin and longing to share the grace of God.

When the Bible talks about these decisions it says that what makes the difference in life is love, which does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. These are the

words that the apostle Paul first spoke to Christians in Corinth. You will see them in your order of service this morning. Or you might see them if you turn in your Bible to 1 Corinthians 13 which we are studying together.

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Well, I can tell you that like modern day Genevans, the Corinthians of biblical times were known for their material prosperity and also for their casual immorality. And, therefore, even after they came to Christ, the first Christians there were tempted to rejoice in so many of the wrong things. And so here the apostle Paul tells them to rejoice in the right things, to make the choice that love makes for holiness.

You see, love is for everything that is godly and against everything that is ungodly.

Gordon Fee looks at this verse, 1 Corinthians 13 verse six and he explains the difference between wrongdoing and truth. He says, “The person full of Christian love joins in rejoicing on the side of behavior that reflects the gospel. And so it rejoices in every victory gained, every forgiveness offered and every act of kindness. Such a person,” he says, ‘refuses to take delight in evil either in its global forms like war and the suppression of the poor, doesn’t rejoice in that or even take to light in evil close to home such as the fall of a brother or sister. It is not gladdened, love is not gladdened when someone else falls.”

Now in the Bible it is important to understand this as we look at this verse talks about truth. It is not talking merely about what we know, but also about how we behave. Usually I think we think of the opposite of truth as falsehood, but the Bible often does what it does here and that is contrast truth with unrighteousness. That is not a category mistake as a philosopher would call it, but simply a recognition that the truth is something you live and not merely something you believe. Truth has to do with right belief and right practice.

Now as we consider the meaning of 1 Corinthians 13:6, we need to ask why it is that someone might rejoice at wrong doing. Well, the most obvious answer is that wrongdoers love the wrong that they are doing. And so the gossip loves to tell a secret tale. The thief loves to take what does not belong to him. The abuser enjoys hurting people. It is the sin itself that the sinner celebrates.

I think the precise wording here points to a slightly different meaning than the one we might think of at first. Paul says that love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. Now, if he were talking about the sinner’s celebration of the sinner’s own sin we might have expected him to say that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. But, instead, he says that love does not rejoice at wrongdoing and that puts the sin somewhere outside of the person who is doing the rejoicing. You see, what love refuses to do is celebrate someone else’s sin. But now why would someone do that?

Well, sometimes we rejoice over sin because it gives us the license to commit the same kind of sin. This was part of the dynamic at Geneva's lake parade. Everyone else is acting lewd or getting wasted. It is easy to join right in. That is not the choice that love makes because love is committed to the holiness of God and to the well being of other people and, therefore, it is careful to avoid being tempted simply by the enjoyments of sin.

And yet I think Paul may have had something even more specific in mind. Remember that in writing to the Corinthians he is addressing church going people and although it is certainly true that Christians are tempted by many sins that simply offer themselves for enjoyment, we are also tempted and maybe more so than most people to feel a little satisfaction when someone else does something wrong, particularly someone with whom we disagree.

And so, for example, when a leader from a different religious denomination falls into scandalous sin, or when a politician from the opposite end of the political spectrum gets into some morally compromising situation, it is hard not to feel a little morally superior. It is a particular kind of smug gladness that only comes when someone else gets caught doing the kind of thing you always suspected that they would be capable of doing.

Love never feels that way. That is the point that Paul is making here, because love does not rejoice at wrong doing. Instead, it rejoices with the truth. And there is a very striking contrast here not simply between wrong doing and truth, but also between two different kinds of rejoicing, because the word "rejoice" in each half of that verse is slightly different and in the second half of the verse where it is talking about rejoicing with the truth, it is a more intense word.

You see, the person who rejoices in the truth has greater joy, a feeling that comes with knowing the absolute truth elevates the Spirit. It brings elation to the soul. This is love's holy joy, the joy that comes from pursuing what is right and good, a joy that never comes when we are simply happy about some kind of wrongdoing.

There is something else we should notice about the wording here. Notice that it says, "Rejoice with the truth," and some commentators look at that definite article, the, and wonder, even speculate that, perhaps, Paul is talking specifically about the gospel, the truth, the gospel truth that Jesus Christ, the Son of God has offered his life for our sins on the cross, that he has triumphed over death, that he has come out of the grave and offers forgiveness and everlasting life. That truth, the truth of all truths.

I think that may be reading a little too much into the little word "the." I think what the Bible seems to have in view here is truth in all its forms. And, you see, the loving person, the person with love in his heart embraces all of that truth, truth about the character of God, truth about the absolute reliability of his Word, the truth about God's sovereignty and about his triune being, about the plan that he has for the salvation of the world. All of these great truths, love embraces all of them.

But there is one truth at the heart of the Christian faith that does more to produce holy joy, I think, than all other truths. It is a truth that helps you not rejoice at wrong doing. It is a truth to live by, a truth to love by, a truth to celebrate and that is the grace of God for lost and needy sinners.

I am not saying that this the only truth that Paul has in mind here, but I can say that no truth gives more holy joy to a loving hear than the grace of God for sinners. And so I want to tell you a story this morning. It is a story that comes from Luke chapter seven. You will find that on page 864 in the church Bible. It is a story, I think, and we will have to look at it carefully to see this, between rejoicing at wrong doing and rejoicing with the truth. It is a story of something that happened one time over dinner, a story that opens our hearts to the grace of God and helps us to see what love can do. Maybe your heart needs to be opened that way this morning, to really see the love of God and the grace of God.

Well, this is the story of Simon and the sinful woman and I invite you to see where you are in this story, to see where you are in relationship to Jesus. Are you the religious person or the sinner?

Well, according to Luke one of the Pharisees, Simon, by name, invited Jesus to dinner. We don't know all the reasons for that, but it becomes clear that one of the reasons is because he is trying to determine whether Jesus is a true prophet or not, which, in case you are wondering, he was.

When he invited Jesus to dinner, Jesus accepted the invitation. We read in verse 36 he went into the Pharisee's house, he took his place at the table and a very familiar place that was for Jesus.

How often the gospels show Jesus at the dinner table. And yet there is something strange here because you have the juxtaposition over dinner of two very different kinds of people and that wasn't ordinarily the case. Jesus was often in the homes of religious leaders, men interested in talking about theology, intrigued by the ministry of Jesus, although not always with the best of motives. Jesus went to those kind of dinner parties.

He also often went to dinner with people who were sinners, the tax collectors, other notorious reprobates, the kinds of people that reputable people usually tried to avoid, people who were desperate for love and yet were drawn to Jesus because—and Luke says this a little earlier in the chapter—he was the friend of sinners.

But now ordinarily the Pharisees and the tax collectors would not have been at the same dinner party and yet here is dinner where the two worlds collide. And the story accelerates with a memorable scene beginning in verse 37.

And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to

wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.¹

Luke tells us that Jesus was reclining at table. He was dining in the formal style of biblical times, his feet stretched away from the table. Now, to us it may seem surprising for an uninvited guest to show up at dinner, but it helps to understand that a meal like this ordinarily would have taken place out in some open air courtyard, not in some secluded dining room.

So when you see the woman stopping by, think of a picnic or perhaps a block party. She stopped by. She saw what was going on and joined in at the edges of the event.

But now what the woman did next was not ordinary, but extraordinary. I think really one of the most extraordinary things that anyone in the world has ever done for Jesus.

You see, somehow she had heard that Jesus was at this dinner table and she ran home and retrieved her most precious treasure, this flask of fragrant perfume. You see, she had an idea. While Jesus was sitting at the table, she would bathe his feet in sweet perfume. She would offer to Jesus the most expensive treasure it was hers to give.

Now as she stood there, suddenly she was so overwhelmed with love and with joy that she began to weep. And you have to just imagine how freely these tears must have flowed, how overwhelmed with emotion she must have been to feel the need, actually, to wipe Jesus' feet. That is how many tears were falling out and falling on his feet. And yet this is what happened, liquid emotion rolling down her cheeks, splashing on the feet of Jesus.

Suddenly she loosed her long hair and began to wipe away the tears and then began kissing and kissing his feet. Luke uses an intensive verb. It indicates repeated action. In fact, Jesus himself later says that the woman did not cease to kiss his feet.

And recognize the humility and the intimacy of this encounter. It helps to understand that in those days the care of someone's feet—this is easy to understand—was a menial task performed only by slaves. But know this as well that in that society a respectable woman would never have let her hair down in public. It is something she only would have done in the in the privacy of her bedroom, in the company of her own husband.

And so what this woman offered to Jesus, therefore, was much more than her perfume. Everything she did was a demonstration of extravagant love. Standing at his feet, kissing his feet. It was as if in this moment she and Jesus were the only two people in the world. Her treasure, her tears, her hair, her lips, everything was for him. It was pouring out her heart with the fragrance of her love.

Now Simon was scandalized by all of that and was embarrassed and offended, shocked. He was too polite, I suppose, to say anything out loud, but he was deeply offended. Luke

¹ Luke 7:37-38.

tells us what he was saying to himself in the self righteous privacy of his judgmental heart.

Verse 39.

“If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.”²

Harsh words that remind us to be careful what we say in the privacy of our hearts where even one short comment can condemn us in 1000 ways.

Making this remark, the Pharisee obviously was saying something about Jesus. He was claiming that he was not a prophet from God. Now he was dead wrong in that evaluation, but it was a logical thing from his perspective to say. He assumed that if Jesus knew who this woman was—notice the assumption here—he would have nothing to do with her. And so when he saw that Jesus was letting her touch him and kiss him, you could only conclude that Jesus did not know what kind of woman she was, in which case he did not obviously have any special access to God or any revealed knowledge of the truth. He couldn't be a prophet if he was letting this happen.

Simon was also saying something about the woman, of course. Luke has already told us that she was—this is verse 37—“a woman of the city.”³ Probably a nice way of saying that she was a prostitute. Certainly she was a sinner. Everyone agreed about that. Luke calls her a sinner, verse 37. He is not putting the term in quotation marks. He is telling us the plain truth about her moral conduct.

Simon called her a sinner, too. That is verse 39. And, of course, the woman knew it herself. That was why she was drawn to Jesus and the grace that he had to offer, the grace of forgiveness.

And Jesus knew this as well. In fact, he went farther. Notice verse 47. She is not just a sinner. She is a big sinner. He sins, Jesus says, are many.

And so, in a way, Simon was right about the woman and her wrong doing, but he was also saying, really, something about himself here and here is where, I think, he made, perhaps, the most serious mistake of all. By identifying the woman as a sinner, he was putting her in a separate category from himself, making a subtle and yet unmistakable claim to his own godliness.

And you will notice how pejorative his words are. That sort of woman, he calls her. That is really another way of saying not a righteous person like me.

But now understand what Simon was really doing. This brings us, I think, to the point of why I have chosen this story to illustrate the truth of 1 Corinthians 13.

² Luke 7:37.

³ Ibid.

Simon was rejoicing at the woman's wrongdoing, not in the sense that he wanted to enter into her sins, whatever he thought those sins were, necessarily, but in the sense that he was glad to use her sin as a way of confirming his own sense of righteousness. He was rejoicing at her wrongdoing and letting it fuel his own spiritual pride.

And how easy it is to fall into this attitude. As long as there is someone else around who seems to be a bigger sinner than I am, I can tell myself that I am good enough for God and I am glad to do it.

Now if someone had told Simon that he was rejoicing at wrongdoing, he would have protested loudly that no one was more critical of sin and particularly sexual misconduct than he was. In fact, I think it may even come out in the language he uses in verse 39. He complains about the way this woman is touching Jesus. In other places in the New Testament where this term has sexual connotations his complaint here, really, is that she is fondling his feet.

And far from rejoicing in that kind of wrongdoing, he obviously is condemning it. And yet far from actually standing apart from sin, he was committing a sin of his own, a sin more deadly, surely, than sexual prostitution. It was the sin of spiritual pride.

Here is a man claiming the merits of his own righteousness, failing to see his own need for grace and, thus, also failing to show any love for the lost or to celebrate the truth of God's grace for needy sinners.

As far as Simon could see, some people weren't even good enough to be forgiven.

And, oh, if there is one truth I wish I could be more effective at explaining and communicating, it is this truth of the grace of God for lost and needy sinners, the freeness of his grace. And it is for anyone, no matter what you have done. This is God's grace for you. This was the goal of Jesus in all of his teaching and, really, the goal that he fully and finally accomplished by dying on the cross and then rising with forgiveness for the world. He was always seeking to turn people away from their sin so that they could accept the free grace of God.

And we see Jesus in the gospels, we see him making, again and again, the choice that love makes, not to rejoice at wrongdoing, but to rejoice with the truth. And we see that kind of love very clearly here, not just in the way that Jesus forgave the sinful woman, although we will get to that, but also in the way he challenged this holier than thou Pharisee.

You see, this was part of the truth that Jesus wanted to uncover here. He wanted to show the lovelessness of this heart. And he wanted to show that so that Simon could see the grace that God has for sinners and that experience in his own life that the love that grace will produce, the love that you will have when you understand how much you have been forgiven.

And as we talk about these things ask yourself again the question. Which is the person here that I can relate to. What is my relationship with Jesus? Is it the religious person or is it the position of the sinner?

Well, it was hard for Simon to see where he stood and so Jesus told him a little parable. You will see the story in verses 41 and 42.

A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?⁴

Well, the answer is fairly obvious, I think, but you know how it is when someone asks you a question this easy. You usually begin to suspect it is some kind of set up. I think Simon was worried about that. You see the hesitation in his answer in verse 43.

“The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.”⁵

Well, Simon was wary, but he was also right. Both men were forgiven their debts, but the one who owed nearly two year’s salary would surely love the money lender the most. And here is a valuable lesson in spiritual economics, the direct exchange between love and forgiveness.

Those who have been forgiven the most, love the most. That is how simple it is.

But now Jesus does not stop there. He goes on to apply the parable in a personal way, the way that a good preacher always does. You see, this story of a money lender and two debtors is really about Jesus and about two sinners at the dinner table, not just one, but two. This is what Simon wasn’t quite ready to see.

And so Jesus began his personal application with an ironic question.

“Do you see this woman?”⁶ Jesus says in verse 44.

See her? He had hardly been able to take his gaze off her from the moment she came in. And then Jesus drew a contrast between what that woman had done and what Simon had failed to do.

Jesus said:

I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You

⁴ Luke 7:41-42.

⁵ Luke 7:43.

⁶ Luke 7:44

did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.⁷

And what an absolute contrast it was. You see, a good host would have kissed his guest on both cheeks and then would have anointed his head with oil. Simon had failed to fulfill even the basic duties of ordinary hospitality.

By contrast, the sinful woman had not just shown hospitality. She had done things that were more humble in their service, more extravagant in their affection. She did not use a towel and basin. She bathed Jesus' feet with her own tears and wiped them with her hair.

Instead of kissing Jesus on the cheek, she had kissed him on the feet, a radical gesture of submissive love. And rather than anointing Jesus with oil, she had given him sweet perfume.

And what does this say about these two people? What do their actions reveal about the conditions of their hearts?

You see, according to Jesus the difference here is the difference that love makes. And the reason for that difference, what puts that love into your heart is forgiveness. This is what he said to Simon, really for everyone to hear.

This is the key insight into the parable. Verse 47.

“I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.”⁸

How do we know? Jesus tells us.

“For she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”⁹

And, of course, when Jesus was talking about someone who loved little and, therefore, must have been forgiven little, he was talking about Simon.

Oh, how totally exposed his heart as now, because for all his theology and all his morality, he simply did not know how to love and we know that because he did not welcome Jesus the way that a loving man would. And we also know it because he was rejoicing at the woman's wrongdoing and that is something that love never does.

So it is very clear that here is a man who had never truly experienced God's grace in his own life and, therefore, could not celebrate that grace in the life of another sinner.

If we are honest we have to admit that our own hearts can be every bit as loveless. I

⁷ Luke 7:44-46.

⁸ Luke 7:47.

⁹ Ibid.

mean, really, you see what Jesus says in verse 47 about someone loving little. You have to say to yourself, “Am I someone who loves much more than that?”

Let me ask a few sort of diagnostic questions to help us get at the condition of our own hearts. I wonder. Have you done anything this past week, even one thing that showed Jesus the extravagant love of a forgiven sinner? Have you rejoiced over his presence in prayer, kissing him with your praise? Have you offered Jesus any costly treasure that was a sacrifice to give or rendered any service that only a slave would give?

You see, these are the kinds of things that love will do when it rejoices with the truth.

Well, then, what about our relationship with other people? How have we treated them? Are you fed up with the sinner in your life? Are you sympathetic with their sinful weakness? Or secretly glad that you do not have the problems that someone else has or that you give in to the same temptations that they face? Have you given up on what God can do in another sinner’s life?

You see, these are things that love never does, because it refuses to rejoice at wrongdoing. And as we consider how little love there is in our own hearts, we should go on to ask the practical question, the question some of you have been asking me as we have worked through 1 Corinthians 13. Where can I find more love? What will it take for me to grow in my love for God and for other people? How can I learn to love the way that Jesus loves?

Well, based on what Jesus said to Simon, I think we see a very good place to begin, a very practical place to begin. We know that love begins with being totally honest about our sin. Simon did not love very much because he had not been forgiven for very much, but he had not been forgiven much because he did not think that he had very many sins to be forgiven.

And so often we have the same attitude. We do not love because we are not honest enough about our sin to take it to the cross. And then our self righteousness shrivels our souls. What Simon needed, what we all need... Is it what you need? It is the same experience that this sinful woman had at the end of this episode where Jesus loved her enough to forgive her.

Notice his words in verse 48. It was implied in what he had already said. In a way we know the woman had already experienced in some way the forgiveness of God. But here he makes it very explicit.

“Your sins are forgiven.”¹⁰

And then he send the woman out in the assurance of her faith with the promise of his peace and, I believe also, a joyful calling to love other people the way that she had been loved.

¹⁰ Luke 7:48.

“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”¹¹

And understand that Jesus has as much love for us as he had for the sinful woman, as much love as he had even for Simon whom he loved enough to uncover the secret of his loveless heart.

You have to understand that as we see these stories in the gospel. This isn't just about the relationship that Jesus had with some other person long gone. It is about the love that the living Christ has for anyone who will come to him with the same kind of faith and the same confession of sin.

Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but always rejoices in the truth of the grace of God. And so he offers forgiveness. He offers free forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness that will touch your heart and maybe fill your eyes with tears. Certainly the kind of love that will give you the assurance of forgiveness and enable you to show love to others.

All of the bad things that you ever did in putting the things so wrong that you hardly dare to admit them to yourself, let alone confess them to God or share them with other people, even those things were nailed to the cross when Jesus died. This is the forgiveness that he offers so that his love now can spill over into your life. And once you know that what it means to be forgiven, really forgiven and you never need to look down on someone else again, you can face the truth about yourself because you really know that you are no more righteous than anyone else and you don't need to pretend that you are better than someone else so that you can feel better about yourself because you know deep down that you are not really measuring up.

And since you know that God loves you as you are, you are free to make the choice that love makes and ready to do what love does, ready to forgive, ready to serve, ready to pour your heart out with love for Jesus.

Oh, Father, we confess that we have two little of the love of Jesus. Are we more like Simon or more like the sinful woman? We know what we ought to believe about ourselves, that we are more like her. Lord, we pray that you would help us to see our sin, to rejoice in forgiveness you offer to us in Jesus and to share his kind of love with everyone we have the opportunity to love in his name. Amen.

¹¹ Luke 7:50.