

Loving Jesus



Gary Wilkerson December 17, 2018

What It Really Means to Receive and Give

When you've been in ministry long enough, you start noticing pendulum shifts in the church's teaching. Sometimes the emphasis is on one subject for a season. Then it swings in an opposite direction for a while.

This is usually a good thing. Whenever a new emphasis appears, it's usually because the church has been lacking in that area. We see this throughout Paul's epistles. One moment he's encouraging Christians toward sacrificial giving, and the next he's rebuking works of religious legalism. He emphasizes the endless, abundant grace of God, and then quickly rebukes reckless sin, instructing us to turn over licentious Christians to the devil. Of course, all these teachings have the power of the Holy Spirit behind them. And each one is meant for us in the various seasons of our lives.

For several years now, the messages I've written here have emphasized God's incredible love for his people. I've felt it was important to encourage you this way, because I've seen and heard from so many who've been stuck in an endless cycle of self-condemnation. They've felt worthless in God's eyes because they thought their struggles disqualified them from the kingdom work he's called us to.

My emphasis has been this: We can't serve him properly unless we know the depths of his love. As John writes, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19, ESV).

I trust you've benefited from that teaching. Then, over the past year, you may have felt a slight swing in the pendulum. I've written a lot about doing the works of Jesus. This has to do with taking the love that God has shown us and embodying that love ourselves. In other words, yes, we absolutely need to receive the Lord's love into our hearts—and it's also important to love him back.

We actually have a call to love on God as he loves on us.

What does this look like exactly? There's no better biblical illustration than the scene where Jesus is having dinner with a Pharisee when a "woman of the streets" shows up.

"One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. 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" (Luke 7:36-38).

To me, this is one of the most moving scenes in all of God's Word. It's an unusual situation: A woman we can assume is a prostitute has crashed the dinner party of an upstanding religious leader. It's an awkward moment—yet it has everything to do with John's statement, "We love because he first loved us." The passage explains why.

“When the Pharisee who had invited (Jesus) saw this, he said to himself, ‘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.’ And Jesus answering said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ And he answered, ‘Say it, Teacher.’”

‘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?’ Simon answered, ‘The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.’ And he said to him, ‘You have judged rightly’” (Luke 7:39-43).

Jesus’ point to Simon is clear. He explains, “I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47).

This woman, emotionally ravaged by the life she led, felt God’s loving grace so powerfully that she had to love him back. So, she initiated a sacrificial act of love—one that cost her a lot. She gladly paid a price not just in terms of the expensive ointment, but also her own dignity. Crying openly, she crouched at Jesus’ feet and washed them.

What a profoundly intimate moment; she opened her heart so nakedly it must have been embarrassing to the people at the table. Yet Jesus celebrates it for the ages. There’s a tender message of grace in this scene, but it isn’t just for the sinful woman—it’s mainly for Simon the Pharisee.

I don’t know about you, but I identify more with Simon in this story.

Nobody likes to think of themselves as a stereotypical Pharisee—rigid, moralistic figures who mostly opposed Jesus. But as several Christian writers point out, they’re the ones in Scripture whose lives most resemble our own. That’s not because we oppose Jesus, but because we strive hard to lead upright lives the way they did. And—let’s face it—because we rarely feel the need for forgiveness.

I don’t know about you, but about 95 percent of my intimacy with God is when he initiates with me, and I respond. His love will fall on me in some way—say, through worship at church, when I lift up my hands to him; or when I’m studying to preach a sermon, and he shows up to give me a timely word. In those moments, I respond to his love with deep gratitude.

But what about most of the rest of the time? How about all those moments when there’s not a worship team in front of us, or an anointing on our thoughts?

For most of our waking hours, we aren’t moved or stirred to love on God. How often do you initiate a move toward Jesus saying, “Lord, I want to minister to you; I want to pour out my heart to you in love”?

That’s what the sinful woman did when she came to Simon’s dinner. She had clearly experienced forgiveness somehow. And on this night, she made a special effort to express her gratitude. She paid a large sum for a costly ointment, she found out where Jesus was, and she humbled herself in the company of strangers to pour out thanks, no matter who might condemn her.

So, what about Simon, the Pharisee? He was alarmed by the woman’s act. Every indication is he was a good guy who led a moral, upright life. I can identify with that. I don’t have the dramatic testimony of a sex worker, like the sinful woman did, or of an alcoholic or drug dealer or gang member.

Maybe you’re like me—someone who grew up in a good home, leading a moral, godly life over the years. You’re not often compelled to demonstrate your love for Jesus the way this woman did. Why?

That’s the question Jesus posed to Simon. And he did it by listing three things:

“Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? 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 did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little’” (Luke 7:44-47).

Subtly but clearly, Jesus is telling Simon, “Maybe the one who needs ‘much forgiveness’ isn’t this woman.”

Maybe it's you, Simon. Maybe you don't love as much because you don't see your need for forgiveness."

How easy it is for Christians—even those in ministry—to see themselves as needing very little forgiveness.

As I read this passage, I realize right away I'm the one who needs to hear Jesus' message. Yet I don't read it as a condemning command to "Just be more thankful!" There's no indication Simon was anything but godly.

No, I read Jesus' words to Simon here as a beautiful invitation. It's an invitation to answer a nagging question that afflicts so many of us: "Why don't I feel Jesus' love more? And why don't I feel more love for him? Most days it feels like I'm just going through the motions."

Believe me, these questions afflict a lot of people in ministry. I'm a sixth-generation minister in my family, and I'm both proud and humbled by that fact. But it's easy for somebody like me to go days on end without thinking I need God. And my sin in that regard has just as much consequence as the person selling pot on the street corner. Why? Because Jesus is forgotten in my heart, while the world he places before me keeps spinning in darkness.

The beauty of this moving scene in Luke is that Jesus is teaching us how to love him. It's striking that even as he talked to Simon, he kept his eyes on the woman and her crude demonstration of love. "Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon...you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair..." (Luke 7:44).

It's as if Jesus were saying, "You could just as easily be doing this too, Simon. The dinner was delicious, the theological talk was great, and those are wonderful gifts to me. But I only want your love."

This Christmas, we once again celebrate the Father's love as the greatest gift we've ever received. So, what is our response? Will we go through the motions? Or will his amazing grace to us—a good job, a loving family, children who are safe and happy—bring us to our knees to wash his feet, and wipe them with tears of gratitude?

I ask you the same question I ask myself: "What will it look like for me to love him back? To initiate intimacy with the Savior and Lord who loves me so?" I say to every "good and upright" person like me: We're called to spread the flame of God's love. But we can't give away what we don't have ourselves. I urge you, receive his love—and love him right back. That's the deepest meaning of receiving and giving—and the beginning of a deeply fulfilled life. May this season find you in the deepest communion you've ever known with your gracious, loving Lord and Savior. Amen!

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