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## No More Labels Luke 7:36-50

I want to wake you up this morning with a little American pop culture. So tell me. Who is this classic television character? That's right! Barney Fife. What was the name of the actor who played him? Right! Don Knotts. And on what TV show did he appear? Right again! The Andy Griffith Show. And just a couple more questions to see how well you remember him. What was the name of his steady girlfriend? That's right! Thelma Lou. What did he keep buttoned in his shirt pocket? Right! A bullet, because Andy didn't trust him with a loaded gun! So he let him have one bullet that he had to keep it buttoned in his pocket, so he wouldn't shoot himself in the foot!

But what you may not remember is that Don Knotts became so popular that he decided to leave the show after its 5<sup>th</sup> season to pursue a career on the big screen. But it didn't go nearly as well as Knotts had hoped because— The character the public missed and wanted to see was Barney Fife, no matter what film he appeared in. In Hollywood, they call it typecasting—being labeled as a certain type of character, so no matter how hard you try, you're never able to shake it. Unfortunately, it isn't limited to the movies.

We do it to one another in real life as well, which is not only frustrating, it can also be hurtful. I'm thinking, for example, of our daughter Rebecca spending the night with my parents when she was 4 or 5 but because she fell off the couch onto the floor in the middle of the night and woke up my dad, he made her sleep on the floor, so he wouldn't have to worry about her doing it again, but not just for the rest of that night but every other night she slept at their house, and she didn't think that was fair, labeling her a certain way at age 5 and acting like she couldn't change even when she got to be 7 or 8. And I imagine you've had people do that to you too. I remember being in last year of seminary, ready to graduate, and having one of my friends at church say to me, "Gary, I just can't envision you as a pastor...a youth pastor, sure (which is what I'd been the last 4 years) but not a real pastor." And I have to admit that wasn't very encouraging at the time, and 30 years later I believe that I was right and he was wrong because I'm still a pastor today. But we do that to each other, don't we? Label each other making it difficult to believe and become what God created us to be.

But that's when we need to remember that they did it to Jesus too! You'll remember in Luke chapter 4, He visited Nazareth, His hometown, where He taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and what did the people say about Him? "Isn't this Joseph's son, the carpenter?" So it says He couldn't do many miracles there, because of their unbelief, which tells me that labeling others is an act of irreverence and unbelief because what it amounts to is saying that this person is so hopeless that not even God can use Him! And that isn't true! But it does lead us

into our study this morning, if you'll open your Bibles to Luke chapter 7, starting with verse 36. Here we meet a woman from a small town like Mayberry or Shelton who's earned a terrible reputation that's been impossible for her to shake, and now she wants to come to Jesus. And the question is: Can He and should He welcome her? Which we'll find is just one more real life example proving that Jesus not only loves sinner of every kind, but can also make them into something no one else can imagine. Praise God! Because if He couldn't do that for her, we wouldn't know He can do it for us. I want to break this study into 3 bite-size pieces to make it easier to apply. The 3 parts are the sinner, the hypocrite, and the parable. But first I want to read the story. Then we'll go back and look at the details. Luke says beginning in verse 36—

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who'd invited him saw this, he said to himself, "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." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.

### **1. The Sinner**

A couple of clarifications to make as we get started in our study—first of all, I don't want us to confuse this event with a similar event that takes place later in Matthew 26 and John 12. There Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus' head with perfume prior to His death and Judas Iscariot, who's about to betray Him, complains that the ointment could have been sold for a year's wages and the money given to the poor. People get the two events mixed up because both take place at a meal and involve Jesus being anointed with perfume, but the other story takes place at Bethany near Jerusalem at the end of His ministry, whereas this one takes place in Galilee at the beginning of His ministry. They are different events that take place at different times in different places and involve very different people. The other mistake people make is thinking this is Mary Magdalene, but that isn't true either because as you'll see next week, Mary Magdalene isn't introduced to us until Luke chapter 8. So who is this woman, and what do we know about her?

First of all, Luke says she'd been a resident of this small town for many years and was well known to everybody, including this Pharisee who recognized her the moment he saw her and knew all about her sinful background while she, on her part, when she heard that Jesus was going to eat dinner at his house, had no trouble finding it. She knew right where to go, which sounds a little bit presumptuous—crashing a party without an invitation. But that was the nature of banquets in those days. Visiting rabbis were the cause célèbre in that culture. Dinners were held in their honor with all the most important people in town invited to meet them and ask questions about all the important issues of the day. But unlike today's celebrity events, where the doors are shut, security guards are posted outside, and nobody gets in without a formal invitation, these affairs were open to the public who, even though they weren't invited to take part in the meal, were allowed to stand around the back of the room and listen in on the conversation.

That's how people kept up on current events and if you were really poor, you might be invited to take home some of the leftovers at the end of the meal. That's the setting in which Luke says, "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 stood behind him."

The first thing I want you to notice is the word "behold," because whenever you hear that in the Bible, it means something surprising is coming and as I say, it wasn't a surprise in this case for a stranger to show up at the dinner. That happened all the time. What was surprising is that a woman showed up who was a "sinner," which is a nice way of saying she was a prostitute. Luke doesn't say if she got paid for it but the way the Pharisees ranked sin, a man could be called a sinner for several reasons. He could be a drunk, a thief, a murderer, or a tax collector. But on the female side, there was really only one sin that got any attention, and that was sexual immorality. So this woman with a reputation for being sexually immoral comes up behind Him, which would've been easy to do, because in that culture the way they sat at banquet tables was to recline on a couch with their feet pointing away from the table. So she comes up behind Him and is so overcome with emotion, knowing who He is, that she begins to weep, dripping tears all over his feet. That's what the word "wet" means in this verse. It means to rain tears. And now she's looking down at His feet and she notices that they're dirty, which was a shameful thing in that culture, to come to the banquet table with dirty feet. So she decides to do what the Pharisee's servant should have done. She kneels down and begins to wash His feet with her tears, and then, because she has no towel, she uses her hair to wipe and dry them.

But she doesn't stop there. Now that His feet are clean, she kisses them. In fact, the word Luke uses for "kiss" means to keep on kissing them. Luke uses the same word later in this gospel, describing the father of the prodigal son who, when he sees his son in the distance that he's come home, he runs to him, puts his arms around him and keeps on "kissing him," he's so glad to have him home. And then, finally, in her greatest act of love, she takes the alabaster vial of perfume that she's brought with her. Alabaster was a marble found in Egypt that was used to hold precious perfume. We bought just a small amount of perfume when we were in Egypt years ago, and do you know it cost us more \$50 an ounce. So she snaps open the neck of this vial and pours the ointment on His feet as if to say, "Jesus, you mean more to me than anything else in life!" And how does He respond? Does He push her away? No! He accepts her with open arms because of how she comes—humble and repentant expecting nothing, but hoping He'll forgive her. Is that how you've come to church this morning? Did you come feeling like you're doing Jesus a favor by being here and you hope He appreciates it? Or do you come like this woman desperate to meet Him and thankful to be in His presence? A sexually immoral woman comes to Jesus humble and repentant and He welcomes her with open arms. "But what about the Pharisee?" you say. How did he feel about this happening at his dinner party?" That's the second piece of the story we want to look at together—

## **2. The Legalist**

And at first it's tempting to give him credit for wanting Jesus to come to dinner. After all, isn't that proof positive that he's interested in Jesus and willing to hear what He has to say? Maybe, or is it possible he had another agenda for his invitation? Remember this man belonged to a close-knit group of religious radicals called Pharisees of which there were 6,000 in Israel. Only

6,000 Pharisees in all of Israel who self-righteously believed that they were the true sons of God called to make sure that everyone else in Israel kept the Law as well, because they believed that if all Israel could keep the Law for one day, Messiah would come and set up His Kingdom. So they became rabid in their legalism condemning and in some cases putting to death those who disagreed with them, which included Jesus “who can’t possibly be the Messiah given the blasphemous things He’s said like claiming to forgive sins, which is something only God can do, and associating with sinners like this woman instead of really holy people like ourselves! They hated Jesus because instead of praising them for their self-righteousness, He criticized them calling them hypocrites and questioning their motives. And so they began to collect evidence against Him, so they could put Him on trial and put Him to death.

And that’s the reason, I believe, why this Pharisee invited Him to dinner—to catch Him saying something or doing something that they could later use to condemn Him! So if that was his motive, and Jesus would have known it, then why did He go? Because as Luke will later write in the key verse of this book, Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost,” even if that lost person is out to destroy Him! How else do you explain His choice of Judas as a disciple or eating dinner in the home of a Pharisee like Simon? The truth is: You and I don’t like self-righteous, finger pointing legalists very much, do we? But the amazing thing is Jesus does! Jesus loves every kind of sinner, even you and me! In fact, what’s most ironic about this story is that the Pharisee feels superior to this sinful woman when in fact he’s the worst sinner of all! “Worse than a prostitute!” you say. No question about it! And why! Because reason #1: Even though he had a zeal for God, he didn’t have a genuine love for God or anyone else for that matter, and that’s what God desires most. Hosea 6:6—“For I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” says the Lord. And Micah 6:8—“For He has shown you, o man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

By the way, if you’ve ever tried to understand the religion of Islam from a Christian perspective, this is its fatal flaw! It’s a religion of legalists. We’re going to give a whole Sunday to this topic in April, I should mention—two of our missionary families who have served in the Middle East coming to help us understand the basic differences between Christianity and Islam and how to more effectively pray for and witness to Muslims—and one of the things we’re going to learn is that Islam is a legalistic religion in which you always have to make sure that you’re doing this at just the right time and that you’re never doing that! And that’s valuable, isn’t it? Developing moral convictions that we’ll never compromise no matter what! But there’s also a danger in that because if your zeal isn’t motivated and tempered by love, it can lead you to where you want to destroy those who disagree with you, which is why radical Islam wants to kill us—because they believe that our culture is corrupt and needs to be destroyed! By the way, if you doubt legalism’s power to do that, all you have to do is remember where Paul’s zeal led him before he met Christ. It led him to where he was willing to kill Christians in his effort to purge the land of sinners. Yet looking back on it later, he said: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst!”

Self-righteousness is both the worst and most dangerous of all sins (How are you doing in that area, by the way?) not only because of how it hardens our hearts towards others, but because, and this is the second thing that made the Pharisee a worse sinner than the prostitute, it made him feel that he deserved a place in God's kingdom without the need of a Savior, because of his sincerity and good works. But be careful about that, friends, because the Bible says you can sincerely work your way straight into hell, if you don't know Jesus. Jesus Himself warned that there'll be many who stand before Him on that final day saying, "But Lord, didn't we prophesy and cast out demons and do miracles in your name?" And then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers!" Whereas the prostitute never had one doubt that she needed Jesus! I love the way C. S. Lewis put it. He wrote: "Prostitutes are in no danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God. The proud, the avaricious, and the self-righteous are in that danger." And yet, I want you to notice, in spite of his pride and lack of mercy, Jesus loved this man and wanted to save him from an eternity without Him. So what did He do to reach this poor, loveless soul? He told him a parable—

### **3. The Parable**

Verse 39. Let me read it again. Luke says: "When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who's touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she's a sinner.' Jesus answered him..." Now think about that for a moment. Simon is feeling a little arrogant and superior. "After all, what kind of prophet is this, anyway? Anyone could tell the moment she walked in here what kind of woman she is!" But he's polite and keeps a straight face, so Jesus won't know what he's thinking. When suddenly what does Jesus do? He answers out loud the very thoughts he's been thinking, which had to unnerve him. Imagine sitting next to someone thinking things about them you shouldn't, when all of a sudden you find out that they've been reading your mind! So now he's feeling a lot less cocky and a lot more teachable. So Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he says. So Jesus tells him the parable that follows. Verse 41—

Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other 50." (a denarius, by the way, was the average wage a man was paid for one day of work) And it continues, "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?" To put it in modern terms, imagine that both you and your neighbor take out loans from the same bank. You take out a loan for \$15,000 to buy a new car that you can drive back and forth to work and your neighbor refinances his home with a new loan from the same bank for \$150,000. Then you both lose your jobs due to the recession. You're worried that the bank will repossess your car, and he's worried that they're going to foreclose on his home. But guess what! The bank is owned by a generous billionaire who forgives both of your loans. You get to keep your car, and your neighbor gets to keep his home, and neither one of you has to pay him another cent! You own them free and clear! So the question is: Which of the two of you loves him the most? Simon doesn't hesitate for a moment because he doesn't have a doubt about the answer. He answers (probably with a little sarcasm because the answer is so obvious), "Well, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt!" And the lights flash, the horns sound, and Jesus says, "Bingo! You've judged correctly Simon!" And then Jesus let him have it, exposing him for the cold-hearted hypocrite he was!

You see, in that day the custom was that the first thing you'd do for an invited guest was to have your servant wash his feet because the roads were dusty and the footwear was sandals, or if you didn't have a servant, you at least provided a basin of water so he could wash his feet himself. It was also customary to greet your guest with a kiss on the cheek to show him that he was welcome in your home. By the way, the men still do that to one another in Romania, and while I found it very sweet and touching, I have to admit, it took me awhile to get used to it. Finally, if you wanted to greet your guest with extra special hospitality, you put a drop of scented oil on his head to cloak the odor of a day's travel. But Simon did none of that for Jesus, who turns toward the woman and says to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house but you gave me no water for my feet but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss but this woman from the time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet. You put no oil on my head, but she poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among them-selves, "Who is this who even forgives sins!" (Answer: He is the Lord!) Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

The lesson is this: The more a person's been forgiven, the more love he'll feel for the One who's forgiven him. And that's what Jesus values most—not our performance, our position, our appearance, or our intentions, but how much we love Him and every other person made in His image! Nothing is more important than that! And again, the degree to which we're able to do that is directly related to how much He's forgiven us. So let me ask you. By that measure, how much do you love Christ this morning? And I realize that's easier for some of us to feel than others. For example, if you came to Christ later in life like this prostitute, you're well aware of what He's saved you from and you can't help but love Him for it! But if you grew up in a Christian home, you may realize you're a sinner, but because you never slept around, got hooked on drugs, or committed any of the others sins society finds so heinous, it may be hard to appreciate how much God has forgiven you. So what do you do about it? Go out and sin up a storm so you can repent and have God forgive you? God forbid! Paul says in Romans 6, "For how shall we who died to sin live in it any longer!" No, what we need to realize is that the greatest sins are sins of the heart like pride, envy, and self-importance, and once we examine ourselves for those things, there won't be any doubt remaining what He's saved us from.

## **Conclusion**

Like me, some of you probably watched the report on 20/20 last week about the British model, Katie Piper, who hooked up with someone she shouldn't have who took advantage of her, beat her up, and when she tried to break up with him, hired a thug to throw acid in her face, melting her skin from the forehead down—one of the most horrific and painful stories I've ever seen! And I don't know that I could do this, but after 18 months of surgery and lots of hard work and support from her family and friends, Katie wants to live again. She knows she'll never be a model again, but that doesn't matter to her anymore because now she has a new plan and purpose for living. Her best friend said she actually has a brighter future now than she did as a model and TV presenter, because what she wants to do now is set up a clinic in London where burn victims can get the same help she got.

But what got to me most was what she herself said at the end of the interview. She said before the tragedy she was self-obsessed. "I was the most important thing in my life, and I always felt that something was missing from my life, but I never know what it was. But now because of my accident, I've learned to believe in God, and I've started to pray, and that void in my life has been filled. I feel enriched in that way through the accident, and I think it's taught me that I don't want to be a cliché...it has taught me that, you know, looks aren't everything."

Isn't that an amazing statement? But you say, "What does that have to do with the woman in our study?" Many things, I believe. Not only were they used and abused by men who never really loved them, but taking it a step farther, do you know how much courage it took for these women just to appear in public? Because the moment they did, labels were slapped on them that were difficult if not impossible to shake. Of course, in our culture, we don't make as much of sexual immorality as we once did, but there are other things we care about even more like what a person looks like on the outside, and if you weren't born with a pretty face, you're overweight, you don't dress for success, and you can't afford to do what it takes to be a beautiful person, then we don't have time for you! And how is that any better than the way the Pharisee treated this woman who all she wanted was to get closer to Jesus? Do we care about that too and are we doing what-ever we can to make it easier for others to meet Him too? And here I bring it full circle to where we started this morning asking you: Can we please get rid of the labels and stop hurting each other by making judgments based on what we see on the surface, and can we instead start accepting one another the way He accepts us? That's His message to us this morning. So let's ask Him for grace to help us put it into practice. Amen?