

Forgiven Much
(Luke 7:36-50 January 8, 2017)



You have studied for four years at one of the best Bible Colleges in the country.

You have made it to the last exam. All that stands between you and graduation is the final exam.

The clock ticks to starting time. You open the paper – and there is only one question on the paper:

When is it better to be a prostitute than a pastor?

When it is better to be a prostitute than a pastor?

Not exactly the question you were expecting.

Your initial thought is that this has to be a trick question.

You then wonder – am I in the right exam?

You regroup and ask yourself – well – is it ever better to be a prostitute than a pastor?

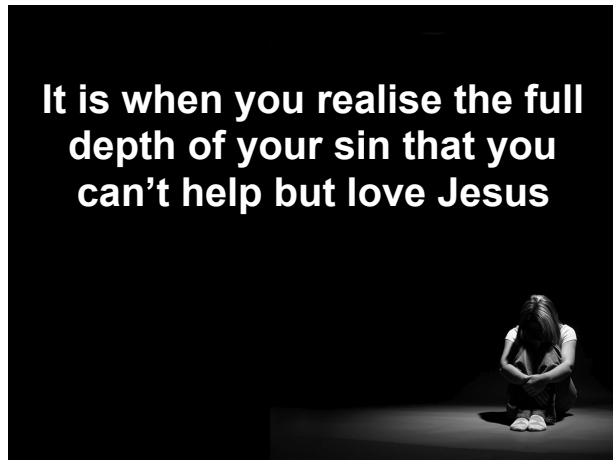
You tell yourself – don't overthink it.

Then your thoughts turn to a story from the life of Jesus.

A story about two people drawn to Jesus – a theologian of the day and a prostitute.

And you remember the point of that story and there you find the answer to the question.

Our passage this morning has a simple point:



It is when you realise the full depth of your sin that you can't help but love Jesus.

The passage is a famous one – Luke 7:36-50.

It deals with one of the most memorable events in the life of Jesus. Gripping, fascinating – but it is not meant to be observed from a distance – it is meant to be felt and to change us from within.

Here we meet two individuals.

Simon the Pharisee and an unnamed women – merely described as a sinner.

Both of these people are drawn to Jesus. They *both* want to know this man who claims to be the Messiah – who says He can forgive sin.

But, ultimately one of them is told – you don't really love Me.

While the other is told – your sins are forgiven, your faith has saved you.

For one – their interaction with Jesus is superficial, passionless and detached.

For the other – their interaction with Jesus is profound, passionate and real.

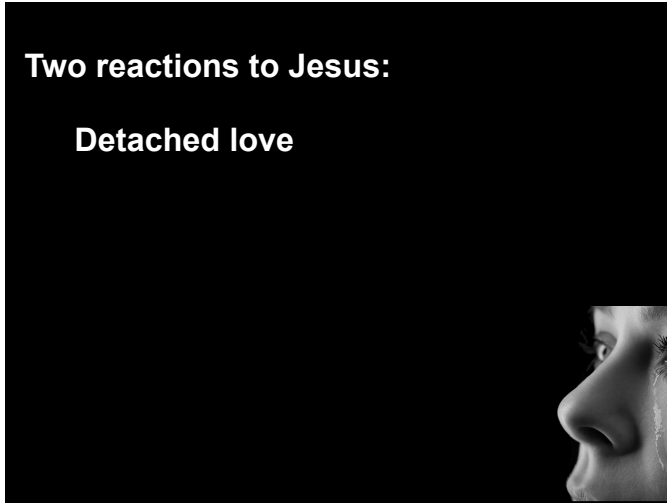
We are introduced to these two people in verses 36-37:

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.

What I want you to notice is that we see:

Two reactions to Jesus:

Detached love



Two reactions to Jesus – first:

Detached love

We see this in the first person we meet – Simon the Pharisee.

At first we might think Simon is not all that detached because he does something astonishing – he invites Jesus home for a meal. No other Pharisee does this.

Throughout the gospels – the picture of Pharisees is one of opposition to Jesus. They think He is dangerous, subverting the truth, undermining Moses. They want Him dead.

Only one other Pharisee ever seeks a meeting with Jesus – and that is Nicodemus – and he organises to meet Jesus at night. He doesn't want anyone to know he is even meeting with the dangerous man from Galilee.

But Simon, not only meets with Jesus publicly – he invites Jesus to his home for a meal.

That kind of hospitality is a big deal.

I asked myself – why would Simon do this?

The only answer I can come up with is that he is intrigued.

He has heard the stories of the miracles – perhaps he saw a miracle.

Perhaps he snuck into the back of a crowd and heard Jesus teach.

Perhaps he became aware of the answer Jesus gave to His disciples when they came and asked him if He was indeed the Messiah. In Luke 7:22 Jesus:

Answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”

Perhaps these signs aroused his interest.

I think Simon is intrigued, confused, questioning.

And the best way to settle the questions was to meet this man from Nazareth.

When you read this passage you realise that Simon has gone out on a limb inviting Jesus to His house. Also, he uses a term of respect – Teacher – when addressing Jesus.

But, at the same time – you find that Simon keeps Jesus at arm's length – his relationship is detached. There is no full-hearted welcome.

If Dena and I invited you to dinner. You would probably have a shower – put on some clean clothes – then drive to our place and arrive smelling fresh and clean.

Not in the first century. There were no showers. Bathing was a rare event. And no cars.

To get to Simon's house – Jesus would have walked. He would have been sweating, had dust on His clothes and dirt on His feet.

The common courtesies were these. When a guest arrived – the servant of the house would be summoned to wash the guest's feet and dry them with a towel. Then the servant would anoint the head and often the feet with a scented oil to make him look and smell a little fresher.

When this was done, the master of the house would welcome the guest with a kiss of friendship.

It would have been quite noticeable that Jesus did **not** receive these courtesies.

Simon does not want to fully embrace Jesus. Jesus is in his house – but not as a welcomed guest. More an object of curiosity.

He is intrigued by Him – but he doesn't want to be seen to fully embrace someone who all of His other Pharisee friends think is a fraud, a deceiver, a sinner.

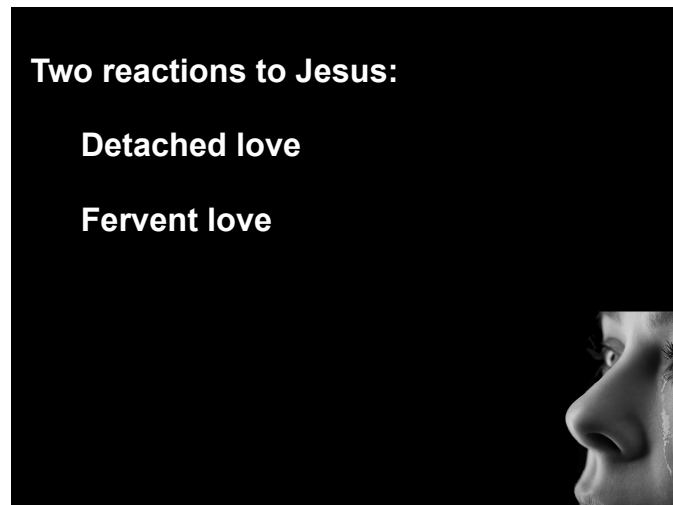
What did he want from Jesus? It is almost as if Simon invites Jesus for an interview to find out what all the fuss is about – to let him make up his own mind about this healer from Galilee.

Simon's peripheral dispassionate engagement with Jesus stands in stark contrast to the next person we meet.

Verse 37:

And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner.

Here we find a second reaction to Jesus:



Fervent love

This phrase – a woman of the city who was a sinner – is a euphemism for a prostitute.

Probably the last place this woman would ever think of treading would be the home of a Pharisee – and especially as she was uninvited.

To walk into that home would not have been an easy thing to do. To go before men who knew her, knew who she was and detested her.

So why did she go?

We aren't told directly but we can work it out.

When the world tells you that you are despised and worthless, when men use you and discard you, when respectable people cross to the other side of the road to avoid you and whisper to their children that you are unclean – you soon learn what it means that you are a sinner.

Little girls grow up wanting to be lawyers and architects and mummies. No one ever wants to be a prostitute – it is dirty and degrading.

In real life – there would be very few prostitutes like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* – it is a horrid debasing life.

But poverty and need have always pushed some women there – and they know where they stand – despised, worthless, used.

No one had to tell this woman that she was a sinner. She would never have looked at someone else and thought – I am morally superior to them.

This woman had given up hope of being right with God.

But then she began to hear about a man who dined with tax-gatherers, lepers, outcasts and even prostitutes. A man who loved them, touched them, and made them clean. A man who said – your sins are forgiven – you are clean. A man who said – God loves you.

She began to have a glimmer of hope.

Hers was no academic interest. Hers was no dispassionate curiosity. Hers was an intensely personal hope.

Could she be cleansed too? Could a prostitute find forgiveness?

As this hope grew – it drove her. She had to get to Jesus.

She swallowed her pride and went before the stares and contempt of those men – why? Because Jesus was there. Her one hope was there.

Verses 37-38:

When she learned that [Jesus] was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, [she] 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.

It is hard for us to grasp how outrageous this is.

This meal was tense anyway. Simon was unsure about Jesus – everyone knew he had not extended all the common courtesies to Jesus.

I imagine the dinner conversation was strained.

Pharisees and fisherman were a strange mix – let alone a Pharisee and Jesus.

Then suddenly a woman everyone knows is a prostitute walks in and begins to weep.

Most men have some degree of difficulty with emotion. I certainly do.

From time to time I been at prayer meetings, baptisms, a time of sharing the gospel or in counselling situations – when someone is overcome with their sin begins to weep and call out to God.

Even though we feel the power – usually we aren't good with emotion. People feel uncomfortable and don't know where to look or what to do.

Now combine it with who this woman is.

Think of it in our terms.

We are having our nice respectable church service – and a woman clearly a prostitute – tacky micro-mini and fishnets – drug tracks up her arms – walks into our service late

– comes right down to the front and falls on the ground weeping – clearly distraught over her sin.

I'd like to think I would handle it well.

I suspect I would look out hoping for someone to bail me out.

Many of us would find this intensely uncomfortable.

But this woman does more than that – she goes to Jesus – touches Him and weeps on Him and cleans His feet.

You can only imagine what Simon the Pharisee thought.

You know I was beginning to wonder if this Jesus guy might have had some truth – but not now. This behaviour tells me He is a sinner like her.

Notice this woman falls at Jesus' feet weeping.

She is overcome by the weight of her sin – but she responds with love – fervent love.

She pours out her love in a very emotive and public way.

She arrived and immediately humbled herself at Jesus' feet. Weeping – this is the word for torrents of tears. Unrestrained sobbing.

It seems she realised she could show her love for Jesus by wetting His feet with her tears and cleansing His feet with her hair.

To do this – she had to let down her hair. This was scandalous in that day.

No respectable woman did this in public. The first time a woman would let down her hair before a man was with her husband on her wedding night.

The Talmud states that if a wife lets down her hair in public – it is her husband's *duty* to divorce her.

I suspect women made sure their hair was well and truly up before leaving the house.

This woman doesn't care. She will bare her soul for Jesus. She has let down her hair for men for money – now she does it for love. Whatever it takes to show Jesus her love and gratitude.

She kissed His feet. Those smelly feet. She kissed them for they were precious feet. And then she anointed them with perfume.

Remember – this is a time when bathing was a rarity. So, the people of the day – especially women – covered the smells of the body with perfume.

Perfume was expensive. So, you didn't use it like we use deodorant – it was saved for special occasions.

For a prostitute – perfume was an important tool of their trade – it made them more desirable. It attracted men.

This woman just pours out **all** of her perfume – not on herself – but on Jesus. She is pouring out this tool of her trade – renouncing her past – she is pouring out what is most likely her most valuable asset – to say Jesus is more important to her than wealth – and she is anointing her Lord – an act of unrestrained passionate worship.

This woman is publicly giving everything she has – dignity, profession, wealth, everything – in love for Jesus.

But Simon completely missed this.

Verse 39:

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him 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."

This whole scene disturbed and revolted Simon. It offended everything he had been brought up to believe.

This woman is unclean – immoral – an outcast. Everyone should know what she is. And Jesus let her touch Him. He did not push her away. There in front of everyone – He let her wash His feet, kiss them, anoint them.

How could He?

I think if we are honest – something inside us understands how Simon feels.

I don't even like saying the word – prostitute. Prostitution is so wrong. It degrades everyone. It violates God's intention. It breaks every commitment. They have diseases. They have no self-respect. They sell the most precious gift – a gift that is never meant to be sold.

Yes – we should expect those who know their sin to be drawn to Jesus – but in reality – we see such sin and our hearts say – sin like that doesn't belong near us let alone Jesus.

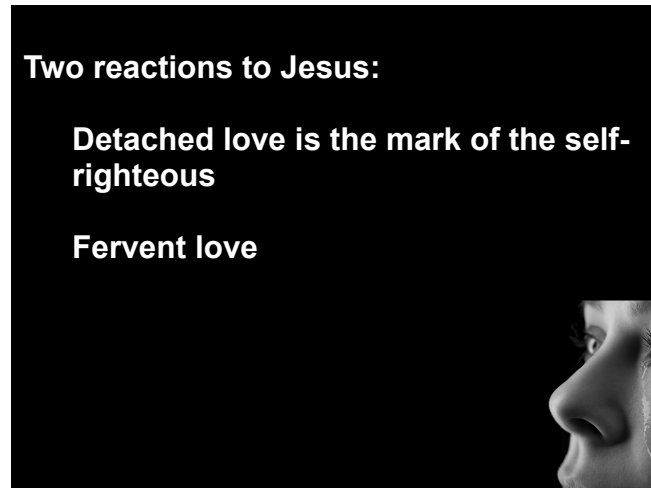
Something inside us doesn't want any contact with someone so degraded and depraved. It seems wrong.

Simon is thinking – how could I have thought this man is the Messiah? He lets a prostitute degrade Him. If He were a true prophet – He would know what she is and refuse to let her touch Him.

But Jesus knows exactly what Simon is thinking.

And He wants everyone in that room and you and I to know why the response of Simon and the woman were so different.

He explains the reactions. First:



Detached love is the mark of the self-righteous

Verse 40:

And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.”

Simon – I not only know what this woman is – I know what **you** are. You are self-righteous.

One of many truths I have learned over the years is most of us have an acute radar for sin in others. We can sniff it out, see it developing, see it lurking – but when we look in the mirror that radar turns off.

We deceive ourselves.

We think far too highly of ourselves.

When we have a position of privilege – it becomes even harder.

George Whitefield and John Wesley were the two main human means God used for revival in the 16th century in England and America.

Countess Huntington was one of the great supporters of their work – financially and in every other way.

But she was one of the few aristocrats who did support them.

Most of the aristocrats believed they were good people and that the fact they were wealthy and privileged showed that God too thought they were good.

They didn't need saving. It was the common wretches who needed saving.

Most of the gentry disliked Whitefield and Wesley because they preached that all men – rich and poor, noble and common, male and female, slave and free – all were sinners equally in need of salvation.

On one occasion, Countess Huntingdon invited the Duchess of Buckingham to hear Whitefield preach. The Duchess wrote back and declined saying:

I thank your Ladyship for the information concerning these preachers. Their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tainted with impertinence and disrespect toward their superiors in that they are perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common lechers that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting and I cannot but wonder that your Ladyship should relish any sentiment so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.

I am not going to be told I am like them – and I need saving.

When you look in the mirror and see someone you think is good and blessed by God – you are mortally offended if anyone dares suggest you are as sinful as the drunkards and thieves and prostitutes who crawl over the face of the earth.

This was the Duchess of Buckingham's problem.

That was Simon's problem.

And now Jesus is going to expose his self-righteousness.

Verses 40-43:

“Simon, I have something to say to you.”

And Simon answered, “Say it, Teacher.”

Jesus said this: “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 Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

Don't mistake Jesus' point here.

His point is not to say that when we get to heaven we will realise that some men and women were much greater sinners – so they loved Him more because they were forgiven more.

Even less is He suggesting that if you don't feel a great love for Jesus you should run out and commit all manner of sin so you can appreciate the forgiveness of Jesus more.

What Jesus is actually saying is that in heaven – the maths of sin and forgiveness works a little differently.

The denarius Jesus talks of is the payment for a day's wage.

We have a few company accountants in the church. One is Tom Zhang – sorry to pick on you Tom. If Tom felt generous and when it came time to pay a worker who had worked for 50 days – Tom made a decision to pay him for 500 days – Tom would lose his job. In fact Tom's employer would call the police and he might go to jail.

There is a big difference on earth between \$20,000 and \$200,000 – just ask your bank.

But, if we are to understand this passage – then we have to understand that in heavenly accounting – in terms of the penalty for sin – there is no difference between a debt of 5 denarii or 50 denarii or 500 denarii or 500 million billion denarii.

Why? Because in heavenly accounting – any debt – no matter the size – has the same **penalty** – eternal death.

In James 2 we find that if we commit *any* sin – we have become guilty of *every* sin.

One sin or many – the penalty is the same – for the wages of sin is death.

If that seems unjust to you – you just don't grasp how holy God is. But that is another sermon.

Jesus' point is **not** that there is a difference in the debt.

The two men in the parable – *neither* could pay the debt. *Both* are headed to prison. Small debt – large debt – the penalty is the same.

The point is that they both encounter grace – forgiveness.

But – don't miss this – the difference is *not* in the penalty *or* the reward – the difference is that one man **felt** the weight of his debt more – and therefore rejoiced more in his forgiveness.

Simon understood this in principle.

It is just he failed to apply it to himself – because he did not see his desperate need.

So, Jesus pointed out the application staring him in the face.

Two reactions to Jesus:

Detached love is the mark of the self-righteous

Fervent love is the mark of the broken sinner



Fervent love is the mark of the broken sinner

Verses 44-47:

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.”

She delighted in Jesus and loved Him fervently while Simon missed out on the most awesome privilege.

He missed falling at the Saviour’s feet and glorying in Him.

Why didn’t Simon fall at the feet of Jesus and pour out a passionate love? *Why* didn’t Simon feel his sin and need?

Because he did not realise that he was a hopelessly lost sinner – beyond redemption – and the man reclining in his living room was his only hope of escaping hell.

I don’t believe Simon invited Jesus to his home – because he was looking for someone to save him from his sins.

He had the Law and his own righteousness for that.

I think he was intrigued by the stories – the miracles – the teaching.

He was curious – not broken.

He was interested – not desperate.

I am sure that as Jesus addressed him – Simon is thinking:

What! Do You want me to degrade myself like her? Cry on You and kiss your feet like her. You have to be kidding!

And the point is – yes – that is exactly what Simon should have done.

Simon was stunned. He is a Pharisee. He works hard at living right. He studies the Scriptures.

This woman lives in sin. She barely knows the Bible. The bits she knows she disobeys.

Yet, Jesus says to **her** – your sins are forgiven and to Simon – you love too little.

Verses 48–50:

And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

This woman was desperate to have her sin forgiven.

Jesus was her only hope.

This is the gospel. This is our gospel.

And she was right.

Jesus says – her sin draws her to Me. And I touch her. It does not defile Me – instead – I make her clean.

Her faith saved her.

Whereas Simon’s self-righteousness condemned him.

Let me put all of this together.

This passage *should* really rattle our cages – because – even as Christians – too many of us are more like Simon than this woman.

We are drawn to Jesus – but hold Him at arm’s length.

We can read the Bible and pray – with no passion – no brokenness – no tears.

We can partake of communion without a lump in our throats.

We can sing songs about Jesus and the cross with so little feeling.

We can look at Christians who weep and cry praise the Lord – and wonder why they are so worked up.

Jesus wants to blow our hearts open and say – *first and foremost*, I want you to have a wild, passionate, personal, profound love for Me – *then* you will have joy – then all these other things will be added to you.

Truth is – my natural bent is to be more like Simon. I like emotion – but I am deeply suspicious of it.

But – as well – I deeply want to have this type of passionate relationship with Jesus.

Why did this woman have it?

Don't mistake Jesus' words:

I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.

Jesus is *not* saying that some *are* greater sinners and have been forgiven **more**.

Scripture is very clear about this. *All* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In the sight of God *all* are utterly sinful.

The point is *not* that this woman sinned more than Simon and was therefore forgiven more.

The point is that *both* were sinners of the worst kind – but only one *felt* it. Only one realised the depth of their sin and the forgiveness available in Christ.

This woman heard of Jesus and somehow knew – this One can forgive sin.

And because she knew the depth of her sin – this woman savoured the sweetness of the Saviour. Her sins were many, they were forgiven and she loved Christ passionately.

I kept thinking about this – trying to put it all together.

I know that I am a sinner. I am a good Calvinist who can articulate the total depravity of man clearly.

But, the truth is that most of the time I don't *feel* like a sinner. Truth is most of the time I feel like I am doing OK.

What is the answer? Should I go out – sleep around, do some drugs, rob a bank, beat up an old lady – just so I feel sinful? No!

Romans 6 – should we sin more now we are under grace? By no means.

Instead we have to regularly realise the absolute depth of our sin.

What helps you shake off your self-righteousness and grasp your sin?

For me – there are a couple of things.

The Bible reminds me of who I am.

This passage is not here in isolation. Remember the context. Jesus has just given the Sermon on the Plain.

Read through passages like the Sermon on the Plain and the Sermon on the Mount.

You will hear Jesus say:

You have to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Your righteousness must exceed the Scribes and Pharisees.

Don't lust.

Don't lie.

Love your enemies.

I suspect you are like me. I might start the Sermon on the Mount feeling like a 50 denarii sinner. A few verses in I am at 500 denarii.

Well before I finish it – I feel beyond human hope.

I have fallen so far short. My only hope is Jesus.

I only have to think through my day – any day. The times anger, greed, lust flare up. Laziness, worldliness, deception.

For me, the **other thing** that makes me realise my sin is meditating on the **cross**.

This sinful woman somehow knew – Jesus can forgive sin and she loved Him.

We know far more than her.

We know that Jesus is God – sinless, perfect, God.

We know that the way He forgives sin is by living a sinless life and then giving Himself as a ransom.

What this means is that my sin is so great – so profound – so difficult – the only way to deal with it was for God to become man and die in my place.

The more I meditate on the cross – the more I realise the enormity of my sin and the more I love Him.

It strips away our self-righteousness and leaves us broken.

Paul said – I am the chief of sinners – and he meant it.

One day when the books are open – I am going to come face to face with what a lifetime of sin looks like.

The greed, the lies, the lust, the half-truths, the laziness – the good deeds left undone, the evil committed – let alone the malevolence of my tongue – the thoughts that are shameful.

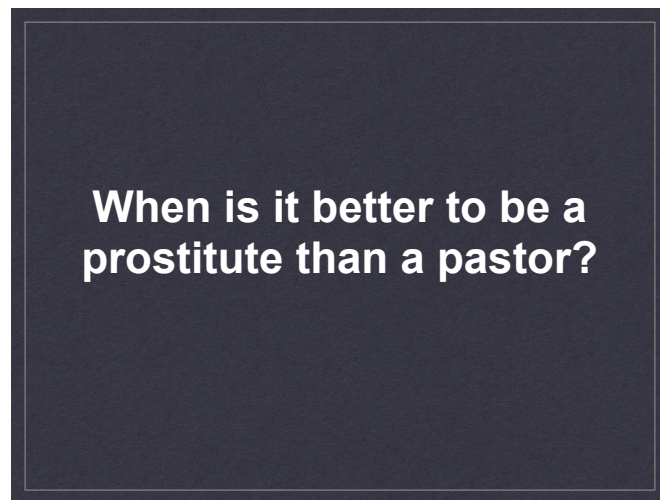
There is no way that when that day comes I will say – but God where is Charles Manson and Joseph Stalin – they are worse – aren't they?

I will look for the Apostle Paul and say – you are not the chief of sinners any more – that title is mine.

And then I will realise – across every sin in that book is stamped – Jesus paid it all. My sin not in part but the whole – is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more – praise the Lord.

And that will fuel my love for eternity.

At the start of this sermon I asked a question.



When it is better to be a prostitute than a pastor?

Here is the answer – **When you are struggling to realise that you are a sinner.**

I have thought long and hard about Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman.

While I am convinced and will go to my grave convinced of the necessity for preaching the Word faithfully in season and out. I would cheerfully swap every decent sermon I have in me for a time each week in our service of true brokenness over our sin.

May our Lord show us the depth of our sin – the glory of His grace – and the incredible joy of our salvation in Him.