

Our All-Sufficient Savior

Part One

Luke 7:36-50

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What a wondrous expression of the profound repentance, devotion, and love which characterizes saving faith! A sinful woman has cast herself upon Jesus with a love which can only proceed from one who has first been met by divine acceptance and love. “We love Him because He first loved us” (I John 4:19). But this expression of love and devotion to Christ occurs against a backdrop of an apostate system of works righteousness; a system which stands opposed to Christ. Both of these dynamics are at work in this text: the heights of love for Christ produced by saving faith in the sinful woman, and the depths of hatred for Christ within a man-made religious system.

It is a picture of stark contrast.

And it is a picture that has reappeared time and again throughout church history, and it remains with us today. For two-thousand years, and in every generation, the schemes of men have sought to pollute the gospel of Christ by adding a Pharisaic-like system of works righteousness. And our generation is no exception. The popular notion that sinful man can *initiate* saving faith and find acceptance with God by his own works is with us today in many churches. It is a Christ-denying form of idolatry, not of stone or wood, but of the self.

The apostle Paul warned that the last days would bring “perilous times” due not to the absence of religion, as some fear, but due to the prevalence of a false form of Christianity; a “form of godliness” that serves as a mere cloak for the worship of the self (II Timothy 3:1-5). Both the Pharisee and the woman in our story desperately needed Christ. The difference was the woman knew her need, while the Pharisee did not. The woman cast herself upon Christ alone, but the Pharisee was quite content with his own program of self-justification — with God’s help, of course.

Our text therefore confronts each of us with this great question:

Do I trust in the righteousness of Christ alone, or do I profess Christ but trust in my own program of personal righteousness?

And this question leads us to my central point today:

To profess Christ, and yet trust in my own righteousness, is in truth, a wholesale denial of Christ.

Now, someone may ask, “Why is righteousness important?” For many today, even the word “righteousness” has gotten a bad name. When people think of the word “righteous” they associate it with self-righteousness and hypocrisy. But genuine righteousness is important precisely because God is holy and just, as well as loving and merciful. And in his holiness and justice, God will not allow human evil to continue forever. Indeed, the Bible tells us God has “appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). On that great Day of reckoning only perfect righteousness will be accepted. No “best effort” will be accepted. In our sin-tainted thinking, it is easy to forget that God dwells in perfect holiness and love. We tend to lower God to our level, rather than seek to share in God’s holiness and love.

But the Bible is clear, that without holiness, no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Therefore God, in his great mercy and love, has sent his Son into the world to save those who believe in him (John 3:16). Only in Christ is God’s perfect holiness and love restored to fallen mankind. Only those united to Christ in his perfect righteousness by faith alone, will escape God’s just wrath and find entrance into the eternal kingdom. My task in this series is to reveal how the self-justifying religion of the Pharisees has slithered its way into the church and threatens to enslave you to a damning, man-made religion, and to call you to a renewed commitment to the Reformation principle of justification by faith in Christ alone.

The Backdrop of the Pharisaic System

Let’s begin by considering the character and religion of the Pharisees, and how the Lord Jesus dealt with these religious leaders. For to do so will provide you with precious insight into the spiritual battle being waged for your soul. The scribes and Pharisees sat in “Moses’ seat,” meaning they assumed the role of Moses’ leadership among the people; they boasted of having

the Law, though they did not keep it (Matthew 23:2-3). The religion of the Pharisees was a show designed to glean the praise and honor of people (23:5-7). And while they professed to be disciples of Moses, the Pharisees were anything but true heirs of Moses and the prophets (John 5:39-47). The Pharisees had created an apostate Judaism centered on external, quantitative piety; the more outward “righteous” things you do, the more righteous you may consider yourself. This religion produced no internal transformation, only the appearance of righteousness. And this religion set aside the writings of Moses and the prophets in favor of the traditions of the elders; and in doing so, the Pharisees continued the infamous heritage within Israel of resisting the work of the Holy Spirit (Mark 7:1-23; Acts 7:51-53; Hebrews 3:7-11,15; 4:7).

And because external, man-made religion is useless in restraining the flesh (Matthew 15:16-20; 23:25-28; Colossians 2:23), the Pharisaic religion was ripe with hypocrisy: it was corrupt, oppressive, exploitive, hypocritical, hierarchal, and greedy. And while these men relished their titles and status in the synagogue, the spiritual welfare of the people meant little to them. They called the crowd following Jesus “ignorant” and “accursed” (John 7:49). Their great fear was not the quality of the teaching, but how Jesus might threaten their place and position within Israel (John 11:45-48). Still, as far as the majority of the people were concerned, the Pharisees spoke for God. The people thought the Pharisees were models of righteousness. These men were given the best places at the feasts, the chief seats in the synagogue, and the people would pause and greet these men with honor saying, “Rabbi, rabbi” as they moved about the marketplaces (Matthew 23:6-7).

But then Jesus of Nazareth came on the scene. He was without rabbinic credentials or priestly family connections. And unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus taught with authority about the kingdom of God (Matthew 7:28-29). It wasn’t long before all the functions for which people regularly went to the temple were being performed by Jesus. He was healing the sick, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, forgiving sins, and above all, claiming to speak for God—*exclusively*—the same claim the religious leaders made. This, of course, set the stage for a grand conflict between an apostate religious system, and Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God. And it was a conflict that Jesus deliberately provoked. And who would the people believe? This is a question to you today as well? Who speaks for God to you? Is it Jesus or the systems of men which point you back to yourself for salvation?

Jesus on the Offense

Preachers often present an image of Jesus as a victim of the religious system of Jerusalem. Some people even present Jesus as a persecuted martyr for simply teaching love and peace and the brotherhood of man. But the New Testament presents Jesus as the Son of David, a warrior-King who engages and overcomes his enemies on his terms. This is the image I hope you can gain today. Throughout all four Gospels, Jesus never missed an opportunity to expose and denounce the Pharisaic system. He began by cleansing the temple of the exploitation and marketing schemes of the Sadducees; he then deliberately and repeatedly provoked the Pharisees by healing on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-1; 10:13-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-23); he violated ceremonial laws by touching lepers and the dead; he associated with sinners; and in today's text, he became ceremonially unclean by allowing this woman to touch him.

These facts reveal that our Lord simply had no tolerance for the Pharisaic system (as well as that of the Sadducees). Such traditions actually made void the word of God and enslaved souls. Therefore, for Jesus, this invitation to dine with the Pharisee represents a call to battle, *and he was on the offense.*

Please bear with me as I elaborate here a little further. I want you to have a clear picture of how Jesus dealt with man-made religion. Let me give you a few more incidents from Luke's Gospel, alone.

- At 7:29-35, Jesus denounced the unbelief of the Pharisees; he characterizes them as incorrigible children.
- At 11:37-52, at another dinner, Jesus pronounced a series of six "woes" (divine curses) upon both the Pharisees and the experts in the Law.
- He then warned the crowds to avoid the "leaven" of the Pharisees, that is to say, he warned of their hypocritical teaching (12:1-3).
- Later, at 16:15, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees saying, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." He told them their self-justifying religion was an abomination in the sight of God. The word translated "abomination" here is used elsewhere to describe God's attitude toward idols.
- In Matthew 23:15 Jesus named the Pharisees sons of hell.

- In John’s Gospel he tells them their spiritual father is the devil himself (John 8:44).

Are you getting the picture here? This is no friendly luncheon between Jesus and the Pharisee. Jesus is on the offense against a Satanic-energized religious system and its leaders. Here is a central point of this sermon:

Jesus actively opposes man-made religion.

What I want to make crystal clear is the Lord Jesus Christ is not indifferent toward those who corrupt his gospel. He is not passive toward those who would enslave his people with man-centered teachings. And what I want you to understand is that by actively opposing the schemes of men, Jesus is acting as your Savior. In our text, Jesus not only saves the woman from the grips of sin and death, but from the grips of a deadly religious system. By exercising his authority to forgive sins and grant this woman peace in the immediate presence of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus leveled a direct and practical rebuke of the whole Pharisaic system.

Throughout each of the gospel narratives Jesus is presented as confronting and tearing down every lie and deception that stands in the way of the truth that your salvation is found in him, and in him *alone*. And he continues to do so today. What is more, when he returns, which is now sooner than you imagine, this great battle will be consummated (see II Thessalonians chapters one and two).

Jesus is your all-sufficient Savior. And he allows for no alliance with man-made religion — and you must not either. It is a spiritual battle we all must learn to fight, and fight well.

The apostle Paul says it this way:

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled” (II Corinthians 10:5-6).

Our weapons are not man-made, but of God. And what is the battlefield? It is truth versus falsehood. Here is a critical principle to grasp and hold:

The battle for the soul begins in the mind.

We must be prepared to discern, expose, and then destroy any “high thing” in our thinking that exalts itself against the knowledge of God in Christ. And we do this by preaching and teaching and living in accord with the truth of the gospel of grace. We must resist the temptation to disobey the gospel by adopting man-made schemes which claim the name of Christ, but point us back to ourselves as the cause of our salvation.

The great deception at work within the Pharisee’s mind was that the chasm between his own righteousness and that demanded by the Law could be bridged by his own program of good works and tradition. In the end, there are only two choices: the righteousness of Christ *or* your own righteousness. And any attempt to add your own righteousness to that of Christ’s is to deny Christ’s righteousness altogether (Galatians 5:1-10). I cannot stress this point enough: Christ will allow for no co-Savior.

The Desperate Need for Clarity

All this would all be academic were it not for the fact that within the unredeemed flesh of each of us lies a Pharisee. Self-justifying religion is a work of the flesh.

Let me say it this way: The lie that we can and must add something of our own righteousness to the work of Christ in order to be saved arises from two sources: 1) *Internally* in our unredeemed flesh, and 2) *externally* from false teachers. And to overcome each, we must be clear about the truth; we must guard our *minds* daily from the influence of both our unredeemed flesh and the influence of false teaching. This is a challenge because we live with one, the flesh, and we are surrounded by the other, false teaching.

Therefore, let me say it again: the battle for your soul begins in your mind. A. W. Tozer once wrote, “What comes to our mind when we think of God is the most important thing about us.”

This means spiritual warfare is not about chasing demons. Spiritual warfare has to do with how we think about God, and how we think about ourselves in relation to God. And this is why we look to the Scriptures alone as our final authority to determine right thinking about God and ourselves. Let’s put that principle into practice, now.

At Philippians 3:1-11, the apostle Paul makes the distinction between man-made righteousness and the righteousness of Christ graphically clear.

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you *is* not tedious, but for you *it is* safe.

² Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have **no confidence in the flesh**, ⁴ though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, *of* the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

⁷ But what things were gain to me, these I have counted **loss** for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as **rubbish** [“dung,” KJV], that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, **not having my own righteousness**, which *is* from the law, **but** that which *is* through faith **in Christ**, the righteousness which is **from God by faith**; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (**Bolded emphasis mine**).

Do you get the clarity with which Paul is writing? He refers to the false teachers as “evil workers,” and “dogs,” and “mutilation” because of their demand that Gentiles be circumcised and live according to the Law of Moses. I am not saying we have to go around calling people evil workers and dogs, but we do need to stop being so nice and accommodating to falsehood within the church. It’s bad enough that our society is built upon lies, but when the church, which is to be the “pillar and ground of truth” (I Timothy 3:15), fails in its mission to be that pillar and ground of truth, what hope is there in the world? None. For instance, I live in a neighborhood in which there are many churches. Sometime they are directly across the street from each other. At times, there are three or more churches within the same few blocks. But there remains a sense of hopelessness in the area. You can see it the eyes of people. One church is “Seeker-Sensitive” and another church is liberal, and yet another is Catholic, but none of them are preaching the truth of the gospel. People are living with lies and not truth. The lies may be couched in nice, sanitized religious practices, but they remain lies nonetheless.

The point here is that Christians are to be passionate lovers of the truth. The woman in our text was an unashamed, passionate lover of Truth incarnate. And her expression of devotion occurred against a backdrop of a dark system of lies and religious oppression. She is a model of Christian faith and repentance for us all. For you and I to be a passionate lover of the truth, we must adopt Paul’s clarity when it comes to saving righteousness.

For instance, Paul refers to his own accrued Pharisaic righteousness as “dung.” This word “dung” refers to the excrement of animals, in this case the excrement of dogs (v.2).¹ Paul is saying that all the ordinances and righteousness of the false teachers was as dog excrement to which they return to feed. This imagery may offend our delicate sensibilities, but Paul is issuing an apostolic warning designed to awaken our senses. The apostle is using language intended to evoke disgust. It is similar to Peter’s comparing apostate teachers to a dog returning to its vomit (II Peter 2:22). Such imagery is also found in the Old Testament where Isaiah declares all our own righteousness to be as filthy rags — a reference to a woman’s used menstrual cloth (Isaiah 64:6).

All of these graphic images are designed to press upon our minds that there is nothing virtuous or glamorous about man-made righteousness before God. God is not impressed with man’s religion. God does not bless man’s religion. The best fallen man can do in his own thinking is to create an idol. But the idols that threaten you today are not necessarily made of wood and stone; rather they are theological idols of thought and human speculation. These idols are found in seminaries, bookstores, and yes, in the pulpits of most churches, today. And how do you recognize these idols? Any teaching that shifts the ultimate responsibility for salvation from God to you, even with Christ’s help and assistance, is an idol.

Listen please, Jesus can be none other than a complete Savior to you. He cannot help you save yourself. He did not come to make your salvation merely possible; rather, he came to save you. He cannot therefore simply be a spiritual guru or moral example. He must be your all-sufficient Savior, or he will be nothing to you. If you feel you have something to contribute to the work of Christ on your behalf, or that Christ saved you because of your moral excellence — you are on the wrong-side of the dining table. You have taken your seat with the Pharisees.

In the next sermon we will examine further how the scourge of man-made, self-justifying religion has plagued the church throughout her history and where it threatens you, today. And I will not be talking about the cults, but about what is commonly accepted as Christianity throughout the world. **AMEN.**

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¹ Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, P. 580.