

A Passion For Christ Pt 1

Out of the Ashes

Luke 7:36-50

By D.L. Deckard

This morning and next week I want to consider a topic which is vital to our mission statement at Parkway. The topic is passion. We've printed on our literature, projected on our screen, memorized and quoted repeatedly from the platform that our mission is about spreading a *passion* for the supremacy of Jesus Christ... From the outset I should say that I believe in this statement. I believe in this mission. I believe it because it echoes God's mission to exalt his son in our hearts through faith, in our church, in our community, in our land, on our planet and ultimately in the new creation for all eternity.

Carrying out this mission statement, however, requires of us one monumental and crucial element, PASSION - passion in our own hearts for what we're trying to spread a passion for – Christ. That is, before we'll ever live with radical abandonment to spreading a passion for Christ, we ourselves must be infected with an unquenchable desire and passion for Christ. Until there is an inferno of what Jonathan Edwards called “religious affections”¹ or “passion,” our mission statement will simply be a bunch of nicely strung together words. We must have a passion for Christ before we will ever spread a passion for Christ to others. It is this deep, Spirit-ignited affection for Jesus that will compel us to engage fervently in missions, compel us to love and care for one another, compel us to share Christ, compel us to live like Christ, compel us to worship Christ, compel us to sacrifice to Christ and compel us to live for Christ. In the Bible this great passion is called by the name “love” and it is the fuel that empowers the Christian life. To be without love or passion for Christ is to live in a dark, cold and hollow shell of Christianity called “dead religion”: a religion without power, without motion and without life. Simply put, it's dead. And many people are content with this kind of inert environment where there is no change.

My desire in life, my aim as a pastor, my prayer as a Christian is for our passion for Christ, which has been weakened by our innate hedonism, sapped by our materialism, suffocated by our comforts, to be fanned and fueled and stoked into something that breaks forth in a brilliant display of Christ-exalting attitudes, decisions and works.

The question is, how? I think most of us recognize that we're not where we need to be - that, generally speaking, we're happier watching the game than reading God's word; happier in the mall than in church; happier doing our hobbies than getting down and dirty in a difficult ministry. This being by and large the case, what are we to do?

With this question in mind, I would like to draw your attention to a powerfully potent story in the Gospel of Luke chapter 7:36-50 that I believe gives us some semblance of an answer. As I studied and meditated on this portion of Scripture, I was moved inwardly as its truth wonderfully blossomed forth in vivid picture and brought fresh light to my own spirit. It was moving because, in this brief story in the life of Jesus, we observe in the most unlikely of people, a former prostitute, an awe-inspiring display of love for Christ.

The story may be likened to an onion. It begins with a focus on outward action, then moves inward to inner driving motive, and then at its core digs into a profound personal knowledge which gives rise to

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*

this motivation. And this is how we will proceed in looking at the story, in three layers. The first layer is found in verses 36-38

The story is introduced in verse 36:

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. ³⁷ 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, ³⁸ 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.

Before we consider the outward actions of this woman (which is where I'm going), it's helpful to take note of a couple background details that bring the story to life. The first has to do with the place. Jesus had been invited to dine at a Pharisee's house which meant that this was the house of a pious Jew who was a stickler for purity. One thing that is patently clear in the New Testament is that the Pharisees didn't consort with sinful people such as tax-collectors and sinners.

The second thing to note is that the woman is a recognized or known "sinner" in town (see v. 39), which probably means she was at one time a prostitute. You put these two realities together, the Pharisee and the hooker, and you get a rather tense situation. This woman, who at one time was selling her wares down in the red-light district of town, now enters a Pharisee's house to see Jesus. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that this woman would not have been welcomed in this environment. It would have been a hostile environment of condescending glares, whispering and scowls of disapproval. Yet she enters into this hostile environment showing great courage to be with Jesus.

I. The Actions of radical devotion to Christ

It's here that we begin to see something utterly amazing in this former prostitute's life – we see in concrete actions of a radical devotion to Jesus. Here, I simply want to point out the radical devotion displayed in what she does, her outward actions! Passion is not true passion if it does not break forth in concrete action. The first display of affection for Christ is her *uncommon courage* to brave scorn and denigration simply to be with Jesus. How many of us are reluctant out of fear of ridicule even to carry our Bible or speak confidently about our relationship to Christ. This woman, driven by a desire to simply to be with Jesus, courageously braved hostility and entered an oppressive environment.

Not only was her devotion displayed in courage, but it was displayed in *genuine brokenness* before Jesus as manifested in her weeping and tears. She was keenly aware of her complete unworthiness and sinfulness and the great need in her life for compassion and mercy. There she stands weeping at the feet of her merciful Lord.

But her devotion to Jesus does not stop there, she bends down (Jesus would have been reclining on his left side with his feet facing out away from the table), wets Jesus' dirty, dusty feet with her tears, and wipes them, not with a towel, but with her own hair. With her own hair and tears she washes Jesus' dirty feet – a task which was reserved for the lowest of servants. That is, her devotion was demonstrated in concrete action of *humble service*. This is radical devotion! How many of us are willing to lower ourselves to such levels to do the dirty and repulsive ministry out of sheer devotion to Jesus?

Or let's consider one final concrete display of passionate devotion to Jesus – her extravagant sacrifice. Back when she first entered into the house, she brought with her an alabaster jar of perfume. In that day, any perfume which was contained in an alabaster jar was very expensive (the alabaster jar in Mark's account was worth about 300 hundred Denarii's or about a year's wages). What is being described is an *extravagant sacrifice* to Jesus. Can we imagine anyone today who is filled with so much adoration, gratitude and affection for Jesus that he or she would be willing to offer up an entire year's wages in an extravagant demonstration of adoration and devotion? Have you observed this kind of amazing sacrifice among those in the church to their professed Lord and Savior? These are the unmistakable outward evidences of profound affection and devotion to Jesus – and it's being displayed not by a pastor, priest or Pharisee, but by a sinful woman. What, we may ask, is underneath this external display? What is the motive that would drive such extravagant sacrifice? In answer to this question we move into a deeper layer of the story – the layer of motive.

II. The Motive of passionate love for Christ

Here the story gets even better. While the sinful woman is displaying unbelievable adoration of Jesus, we get to hear what the Pharisee is thinking. He says to himself (middle of verse 39), "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." We discern from the Pharisee's thoughts both his disgust for the woman as well as his doubt in Jesus. At this point, the Pharisee sees the woman merely as a disgusting sinner and Jesus as an ignorant man. That is, the Pharisee isn't seeing things correctly. His perspective is one of arrogance and condescension. Jesus, however, is going to turn this arrogant perspective on its head.

Jesus, knowing the thoughts of Simon the Pharisee gives him a hypothetical situation saying:

⁴¹ "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² 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?" ⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose [you can hear a begrudging spirit in these words] the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

The Pharisee, at this point, has just stepped into a trap. He's just admitted that the one who's been forgiven the greater debt loves more. Tactically speaking, this was a bad verbal move for the Pharisee because it was going to come back at him. And here it comes. Jesus turns and points to the woman and springs the trap on Simon saying:

⁴⁴ "...Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

Theirs is a convicting contrast being made between the Pharisee and the sinner. We find at this point in the story that the Pharisee didn't even show the basic hospitality to Jesus. It was customary at the very least to provide water for people living at that time to wash their feet before entering a house. It was a customary sign of friendship to greet one another with a kiss, and it would have been a sign of respect to offer an anointing with oil in the hot arid climate of the Middle East. Is the picture starting to become clear? The Pharisee's uncompassionate and inhospitable spirit was being exposed by this sinful woman's extravagant adoration of Jesus. Everything the Pharisee should have done – the basics of kindness and love – he failed to do. Everything the Pharisee failed to do, the "sinner" did with extravagance – she washed with tears, dried with hair and anointed with luxurious perfume, not

common and relatively cheap oil. These two very different actions are linked by Jesus to a common motive – love. Here is the motive behind her lavish display of devotion – love for Jesus. We observe this in verse 47 when Jesus says, “⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much, but he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

Jesus shows that this woman’s amazing display of devotion was motivated by a great love. She “loved much”. Her courage, her brokenness, her humble service and extravagant sacrifice are merely expressions of a passionate love for Jesus! The Pharisee, however, by nature of his absence of action, loves little, if at all.

Now, I wonder if we here were to categorize where we are, who would we be more like? Would we be more like the Pharisee who shows no outward sign of affection and therefore has little to no love? Or, could we in all honesty say that our lives and deep love for Jesus reflect the woman?

But wait, we can’t stop here because there is something deeper. There’s another layer to this onion. Her outward actions were motivated by a great love which was prompted by something deeper. We observe this in the analogy that Jesus used in verses 42-43 as well as the last part of verse 47. What is it that prompts such great love?

III. The Knowledge of great mercy over great sinfulness

What prompts great love is great forgiveness. Or in my own words, what prompts great love is the inner knowledge of great mercy over great sinfulness. You see, there are two complementary aspects of God’s great forgiveness: great mercy on the one hand on the part of the forgiver which triumphs over great sin on the other hand on the part of the sinner.

I believe these two aspects of forgiveness – divine mercy and human sinfulness – cannot rightly be understood apart from each other. That is, we will never understand how truly sinful and needy we really are until we begin to grasp how great God’s mercy is toward us – as demonstrated in the cross of Jesus. Nor will we ever grasp how immense and boundless God’s mercy is to us until we know personally in our hearts how deeply sinful and depraved we really are.

The sinful woman knew how great God’s mercy was because she knows how deep her sin went and how big her debt was. We note in the story that the woman had “many sins” (v. 47). But simply to say that she had many sins is to miss the point. Not only did she have many sins, but she *knew* she had many sins. She was acutely aware of her utter sinfulness, her fallen and spiritually impoverished state as evidenced in her broken tears. She knew she was a great sinner and in need of great mercy! If the Pharisee could see for one moment how sinful his pride, arrogance and self-righteousness were before God, he too would fall down weeping before Jesus. But he was blind to his own depravity. And because she knew she had been forgiven a great debt of sin, she had a great love for Christ.

You see, here we make a common and fatal mistake. We think that only those who “sin” big sins are great sinners – the prisoners, the prostitutes, the homosexuals, etc., etc. Here in this text, however, the greatest sinner is not the broken woman, but the hard-hearted, unloving and passionless Pharisee. In the end, the sin of spiritual pride will be judged much more harshly by God than sins of homosexuality (Cf. Matt. 11:21-25).

And so it is with us, brothers and sisters. We will never display in concrete actions lavish devotion to Jesus until we love him with a great and passionate love. And we will never love Jesus with a great and passionate love until we discern how great his forgiving mercy is toward us. And we will never discern how great his forgiving mercy is toward us until we know in our heart of hearts how sinfully depraved we each are – how great the debt of forgiveness is!! This is the center of the onion. Awareness of how great our debt is and consequently how vast Christ’s mercy extends to forgive such a monstrous debt prompts us to love much. That’s the logic in the passage - the one who is forgiven much loves much.

Our world teaches us the opposite. It tries to promote love between people by telling us that we’re good, that we’re special, that we deserve this and we deserve that. It tries to bolster the human capacity to love by making much of us. That is, it wants us to believe lies about who we really are. We read books intended to bolster self-esteem, and in my estimation, they show us an image of ourselves which is deceitfully distorted much like a carnival mirror. If one stands in front of a carnival mirror, one can make themselves skinny when they’re really obese, burly when they’re really scrawny. It is nothing but a distortion of reality.

The Bible shows us the true picture of who we are and I guarantee you, it does not make much of us. That is, if you want to feel good about yourself, don’t read the Bible because its intent is to humble us by declaring and showing to us through its vivid history and law how evil we really are.

But here, brothers and sisters, is the glorious irony and the hope. The way to true love for Christ and one another, the way to true joy in Christ and gratitude toward Christ, is by coming to grips with how great your depravity is, so that you might know how great His mercy is! Until we come to grips with our own utter depravity (yes, even Christians, especially Christians), we will never come to grips with the greatness of God’s astounding mercy, which inspires great love, which erupts in extravagant displays of affection and worship! One writer puts it this way:

Initially we fear looking squarely at our sins, lest we get overwhelmed. But the reverse turns out to be true. The more we see the depth of our sin, the more we realize the height of God’s love.... Seeing our sin becomes, paradoxically, an opportunity for joy. Then we are free indeed: free from any need to hide, to conceal or impress, to make excuses for ourselves, to demand our fair share. Free to love God with abandon, free to love others without bargaining and conditions.²

You see, oddly enough, passionate love for Jesus arises out of the ashes of a personal knowledge of our utter sinfulness and God’s triumphant mercy.

One of the reformers writes it this way:

“... From the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and – what is more – depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone We cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves.”³

Moreover it should be noted that the Christians who have demonstrated the greatest love for Jesus have also had a profound awareness of their own sinfulness and depravity. Didn’t Paul himself say of

² Frederica Mathewes-Green, “What Ever Happened to Repentance”, *Christianity Today*, Feb, 2002. pp 58-60.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* p. 36-37

himself in Romans 7:24 “What a wretched man I am”? He did not say, “What a wretched man I was”, but “What a wretched man I *am*” [present tense]. Did he not later say to Timothy using the present tense that Jesus, “came into the world to save sinners - of whom I *am* the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15). John the Baptist felt so utterly unworthy of Jesus that he felt he couldn’t even unlatch his sandals.

Jonathan Edwards said of his own experience:

“There was no part of creature holiness that I had so great a sense of its loveliness as humility, brokenness of heart and poverty of spirit; and there was nothing that I so earnestly longed for. My heart panted after this — to lie low before God, as in the dust; that I might be nothing and that God might be *all*, that I might become as a little child.

Or we might hear this truth echoed in the song of the former slave trader, John Newton who wrote, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a WRETCH like me...”

Bonhoeffer applied this even to our love for others when he said:

“If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sin at all. My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible... He who would serve his brother in the fellowship must sink all the way down to these depths of humility”⁴

What I’m suggesting, brothers and sisters, is that if we are passionless and without true love for Jesus or others, as the Pharisee was, then perhaps we don’t know how great God’s mercy is toward us because we don’t know how sinful we truly are. To know the greatness of Christ’s mercy in light of the greatness of our sin gives birth to passionate love, which, in turn, bursts forth in radical displays of devotion to Jesus.

I would recommend, during this Lent season, on which the church historically has emphasized humility and contrition, that we pray that the Spirit of God takes off the blinders to see ourselves for who we really are NOT for the purpose of self-loathing (which is nothing more than an expression of twisted pride), but for the purpose of knowing how great God’s mercy is toward us in Jesus – so great that he would forgive even us, o wretched men that we are.

Soli Deo Gloria

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* p. 96