**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**EXTRAVAGANT LOVE**

**Luke 7:36-50**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we continue our series in the Gospel of Luke called “Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt.”

What is love? So goes one of the most popular dance tunes from the early 1990’s. The song was so overplayed that I cannot ask the question, “What is love?” without hearing, “Baby don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me, no more” echo in my mind.

The song isn’t a particularly good one. It doesn’t even answer the question it keeps asking over and over again. But I think the song became so popular because of the power of the question: “What is love?”

As a kid, I always thought that love was romance. Love is what you saw in a Disney movie when the prince and princess kissed and got married. Then as I grew up, I began to learn that love was more than romance. I learned that my parents loved me, and that they showed their love for me by providing for me and guiding me through hard choices. Finally, when I became a Christian, I started hearing that love wasn’t just romantic emotion or family responsibility. Love was a commitment, a decision to stay with someone regardless of how you feel.

This is how many Christians understand love, and rightly so. It’s a commitment. The Old Testament often describes God as having “steadfast love”, which refers to God’s *covenantal* love towards his people: his unbreakable promise to restore, redeem, and rescue his people, regardless of how he felt.

But if we would say that love is *only* a commitment, and nothing more, then we would not be faithful to the biblical concept of love. Love is commitment, but it is also much more than that. It is a multi-faceted concept that involves not only the will, but the emotions.

In our text today, we’re going to see a woman expressing her love for Jesus through the outpouring of her emotions. Jesus doesn’t criticize her for being overly emotional. He doesn’t challenge her to demonstrate her love through commitment. Instead, Jesus commends her for her great love for him, and in doing so, Jesus also challenges us to love him the same way.

The title of this message is **Extravagant Love**. To be extravagant is to lack restraint. We usually talk about extravagant purchases, like when someone spends thousands of dollars on a costly piece of jewellery or a designer accessory. It’s an extravagant purchase because that person didn’t show financial restraint. Jesus wants us to love him without restraint, to love him with an extravagant love.

My aim today is to show you that **Extravagant Love for Jesus Comes from His Extravagant Love for Us.** We will have three points today:

1. The Depth of Extravagant Love
2. The Source of Extravagant Love
3. The Object of Extravagant Love

(1) **THE DEPTH OF EXTRAVAGANT LOVE**

Our text today begins in verse 36, where we find Jesus accepting a Pharisees’ invitation to join him at his house for a meal. So far in the Gospel of Luke, the Pharisees are the closest that Jesus has been to having enemies. They challenged his authority to forgive the sins of the paralyzed man. They questioned why Jesus spent so much time in the homes of notorious sinners. They furiously started plotting to get rid of Jesus after he healed a man’s withered hand on a Sabbath. And for those who know the end of the story, the Pharisees would be the main group responsible for having Jesus executed on a cross.

The Pharisees didn’t like Jesus. Indeed, at this point in Jesus’ ministry, they were starting to hate him. But Jesus would not respond in kind. Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies, to do good to those who hate them, to bless those who curse them, and to pray for those who abuse them. When Jesus accepted the Pharisee’s offer to eat in his home, Jesus shows his disciples how love for enemies is done.

This isn’t a one-off either. Luke records two other occasions in which Jesus accepts a Pharisee’s invitation to have a meal in his home:

“But while Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table.” (Luke 11:37)

“One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.” (Luke 14:1)

Jesus knew that spending time with the Pharisees could bring him harm. They were looking for ways to accuse him and get rid of him. But like a sheep among wolves, Jesus accepted their invitations anyways. Jesus was willing to walk the talk of loving one’s enemies, so that he could extend his offer of salvation to everyone, regardless of whether they were his friends or his foes.

Verse 37 tells us that, while Jesus was at the Pharisees’ house, a “woman of the city, who was a sinner”, entered the Pharisees’ home in order to seek Jesus out. In those days it was common for people to host a special meal in honour of one of the host’s guests, where the door would be left open and uninvited guests could enter, sit by the walls, and hear the conversation.

This woman, however, was not only uninvited. She was unwelcomed, because she had a city-wide reputation for being a sinner.

Luke doesn’t tell us why she was known as a sinner, and we don’t need to know. It’s sufficient for us to know that her sin was so great that it was well-known among the people in that town. Even the Pharisee, who presumably kept his distance from notorious sinners, knew about her reputation, as we see in verse 39.

Why would such a woman go into the house of a Pharisee? One would expect a Pharisee’s house to be the last place a woman like her would want to go to. Sinners have zero interest in being with the self-righteous. So why would she go? Verse 37 tells us why: “she learned that *he* was reclining at table in the Pharisee’s house”. Jesus was there in the Pharisee’s house, and if Jesus was there, then the woman needed to be there as well.

Her visit with Jesus was carefully planned. She brought an alabaster flask of ointment with her, which she likely intended to use to anoint Jesus’ head, which was a common way of honouring someone in a very special way. In Mark’s gospel, we are told that such a jar of perfume could be worth 300 denarii. One denarius was the equivalent of a day’s wages for a common labourer. In other words, this jar could have been worth about a years’ wages for a lower-income worker. Think $20,000 in today’s currency.

This woman had a plan, but as soon as she entered the house and saw Jesus, her plans fell apart.

Verse 38 tells us that, upon seeing Jesus, she started weeping. Her eyes didn’t just mist over. The word for “weeping” here is the same word used for “rain showers”. She was so incredibly moved by the sight of Jesus that tears started pouring out of her eyes.

She would have seen Jesus lying down on his side at the dinner table, because that’s how people typically ate their meals. They would face the dinner table, and their feet would point away from the table because they were so dirty. It was a common courtesy for hosts to give their guests an opportunity to wash their feet, either by offering a servant or by providing a bowl of water. The Pharisee offered Jesus neither. Jesus may have been there as the Pharisee’s guest, but he was hardly honoured as such.

In contrast, the woman was desperate to honour him. When she saw his feet dirty and unwashed, she immediately went over to wash them. Of course, she didn’t plan to do this. She may have been a planner, but she didn’t plan for this. She hadn’t brought water to wash his feet nor a rag to dry them. But that didn’t stop her. She was determined to honour Jesus, and to show him her love for him. And so, she used the only things she had with her: her tears to wash, and her hair to dry.

In that culture it was dishonourable for a woman to let her hair down. The Apostle Paul actually wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 11. It was culturally inappropriate for a woman’s hair to be uncovered in public. To do so was shameful, and would have been extremely embarrassing.

But that didn’t stop her either. She was willing to suffer the shame and embarrassment of uncovering her hair in the home of a Pharisee who already held her in contempt, all so that she could clean the feet of Jesus.

To top it all off, the woman then poured the expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet and kissed them. To her, Jesus was so precious that even his feet were worthy of the most extravagant offering she could bring, and they were deserving of the most intimate affection she could show.

The woman doesn’t say a single word throughout this entire encounter, but we don’t need words. Her actions say enough. She was telling Jesus how much she loved him. She was telling him that she loved him so much that she was willing to suffer shame and embarrassment in order to serve him with all she had: body, mind, strength, and soul.

This is what extravagant love looks like. It’s a love that lacks restraint. It’s a love that gives and gives to Jesus, and when it seems like enough has been given, it finds new ways to give.

Jesus wants us to love him like this. In verse 47, Jesus commends the sinful woman’s actions, telling everyone in the Pharisee’s house that “she loved much”. He wants all who come to him to love him just as much as this woman, loving him not only with our will, but with our emotions.

Many of us think of our emotions as an intensely private part of our lives. We may feel deep emotions, but we’re too shy to show them. Different cultures tend to approach emotional expression differently. As a Chinese-Canadian, I personally come from an emotionally reserved culture. Showing our emotions just isn’t part of our public life. For example, for the longest time, Nina and I would be too shy to hug each other in public, let alone kiss!

Jesus doesn’t want us to love him like that. He wants us to be so lost in our love for him that we stop thinking so much about what others may think of us and start thinking more about how we can express our love to him.

One of the most practical ways we can do this is to change the way we worship when we gather as a church, whether it be at a Sunday service, a prayer meeting, or a small group. Let’s not be afraid or shy to show our emotions as we worship. Jesus isn’t just worthy of singing. He’s worthy of *joyful* singing. Jesus isn’t just worthy of silent prayer. He’s worthy of *brokenness* and *tears*.

I’m not saying that we should all just do whatever we feel like doing. Worship isn’t just a personal experience. It’s a communal one, so we need to worship in such a way that we’re not distracting others. But I can tell you right now that there’s a lot we could do to express our love for Jesus that *wouldn’t* be a distraction. You could cry, clap, kneel, even cheer after a song without distracting others, and they are all powerful ways that we can express our deep love for Jesus.

If we start trying to be more emotionally expressive in our worship, it may be that we become overly expressive and distracting. That’s why God gave churches pastors. Tim and I have a responsibility to guide us through potential errors by teaching and applying the Word of God. I can tell you though, that as your pastor, I’d rather correct too much expression than see no expression at all in our church. Jesus is worthy of our extravagant love, a love that lacks restraint, a love that lavishes honour upon him with tears and kisses.

(2) **THE SOURCE OF EXTRAVAGANT LOVE**

But what if you’re just not feeling it? You see the sinful woman’s extravagant love for Jesus, but you just can’t relate. What should you do? It may be tempting to try to manufacture emotions, especially if everyone else seems to be expressing deep affection for Jesus and you’re not. This is one of the problems with many churches today, where the love of Jesus seems to take a back seat to the love of the emotions themselves. We don’t want to go there. We don’t want to manipulate our emotions. We want to feed our emotions with the glorious truths of the gospel. That’s what we’re going to see next in our text, which leads to our second point: the source of extravagant love.

Luke tells us that the Pharisee was disturbed by what he was seeing. Verse 39 says, “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.”

It seems that the Pharisee had invited Jesus into his home with at least some interest in discerning whether he was indeed a prophet sent by God. But having seen Jesus receive the sinful woman’s service, he began to doubt. After all, wouldn’t a prophet have access to divine knowledge, including the sins of this woman? In the Pharisee’s mind, a true prophet would never have let a woman of such moral filth touch him, and therefore Jesus must not be a prophet.

Was he right? Was Jesus actually ignorant of the woman’s sins? Of course not. Jesus knew her sins better than anyone, and he reveals this knowledge in the parable he tells in verses 41-42: “A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii (about $50,000 today), and the other fifty (about $5,000 today). When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

The answer is obvious, isn’t it? Surely the one who had the larger debt would love the moneylender more! To the Pharisee’s credit, he answers correctly in verse 43, though he gives his answer quite begrudgingly. “Well, I *suppose* the one for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” He answered like one who knew where this was going. What does the parable mean?

The moneylender in the parable stands for God, and the debtors stand for people: the sinful woman, the Pharisee, you, and me. Every time we sin, we go further into debt with God, which distances us and alienates us from him. If we can pay off the debt, then we’ll be right with God again, but if we can’t, then we will be punished. Our problem is that we can’t repay the debt, because all our works, even the good ones, are stained with sin. Every day, our debt grows larger and larger as we sin against God in our actions, our words, our thoughts, and our emotions.

What hope do we have? If we would only look to ourselves, then none. For us to have any hope, we need to look to God. We need him to cancel our debt, so that we no longer have to live under its burden and suffer its punishment. Jesus tells us in this parable that this is exactly what God has done. He cancels debts, both big and small, because none of us can repay our debts.

This is a very simple parable, and much shorter than most of Jesus’ parables, but it is jam-packed with meaning. Let me draw your attention to what I believe are the three main points of the parable.

The first is that, by telling the parable, Jesus showed that he did indeed possess prophetic knowledge. The Pharisee was wrong in thinking that Jesus was ignorant of the woman’s sins. Jesus knew her sins more than anyone else could ever know. He knew every sin she had ever committed, not just the ones she had become known for. He knew precisely how long her record was, and he knew that she could never repay it. But God, in his mercy, cancelled the entire debt, so that she could be free from its burden and be reconciled to him once again.

The second insight of the parable is that Jesus showed that he also had prophetic knowledge of Simon the Pharisee’s thoughts. Verse 39 says that Simon the Pharisee asked *himself* why Jesus, as an alleged prophet, was allowing the sinful woman to touch him. Simon may not have shared this question with anyone else, but Jesus knew it nonetheless. Jesus doesn’t just know our sins. He also knows our thoughts, and he showed Simon that he knew his thoughts by answering his question in the parable.

Why was Jesus willing to let the sinful woman touch him? Because, in his eyes, she was no longer a sinful woman! Her sins were forgiven. None of her sins were counted against her any longer. Jesus saw none of the moral filth the Pharisee saw, because her record of debt against God had been completely cancelled.

The third insight of the parable, and the most important one, is that it explains why the sinful woman loved Jesus so much. Who loves the moneylender more? The one for whom he cancelled the larger debt. The woman’s debt with God was great, but God’s mercy was greater, and the greatness of his mercy birthed in her a greatness of love for Jesus. She loved him with an extravagant love because he loved her with an extravagant love first. As 1 John 4:19 says,

 “We love because he first loved us.”

The key to growing in our love for Jesus is growing in our knowledge of his love for us, and the only way to do that is to grow in our knowledge of our sin. It is only when we stare our sin straight in the face, beholding it in all its ugliness and darkness, that we will finally start to see how much Jesus loves us. Why? Because we see how much he has forgiven us. The greater the forgiveness he gives to us, the greater the love we give to him.

This is the true source of an abiding, genuine, extravagant love. We cannot develop a deep love for Jesus without it. It’s sad that Christians often believe that focusing on sin only leads to guilt and condemnation. That’s not true. Focusing on our sins would only lead to guilt and condemnation if they still hung over us, but they don’t! They are forgiven! Jesus tells us that our sins are completely and irrevocably forgiven by God. Our debts, whether great or small, are cancelled, and they will never be held against us again.

Do you want to grow in your love for Jesus, to love him with *much* love as the sinful woman did? Then know your sins more. Once you do, you will know God’s love more, and you will respond with a greater love for him.

(3) **THE OBJECT OF EXTRAVAGANT LOVE**

Now if you’ve been listening closely, you may be asking yourself this crucial question: if God is the moneylender who forgives our debts, then why should we love Jesus? What role does Jesus play in this parable? This leads to our third point: the object of extravagant love.

In verse 43, Jesus confirms that Simon’s answer to the parable was correct: the one with the larger debt cancelled would love the moneylender more. That was the whole point of the parable, to show that the greater the debt, the greater the love for the one who forgave the debt. What does he do next in verses 44-46? He details *every single thing* that the sinful woman did out of love for *him*.

In doing so, Jesus reveals that he is the moneylender who forgives our debts of sin, and therefore Jesus is the proper object of our love. The sinful woman loved *Jesus* with an extravagant love because *he* was the one who had forgiven her of all her sins. Jesus confirms this in verse 48, when he says to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” A prophet would say, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Your sins are forgiven’”, because a prophet only speaks on behalf of God. But Jesus is more than a prophet. He speaks out of his own authority, and he has the authority to forgive sins.

This wasn’t lost on the people who were in Simon’s home. Verse 49 says that they began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’” This isn’t the first time Jesus declared someone’s sins forgiven. Back in Luke 5, Jesus told a paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven as well. This led the Pharisees to ask this question:

“Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21)

The same question is being asked here: Who is this, who even forgives sins? Jesus doesn’t actually give them an answer. Instead, he leaves the question to the Pharisees to answer for themselves, because there can only be one answer. If God alone can forgive sins, and Jesus forgive sins, then Jesus must be God.

This is the central question that Luke seeks to answer in his Gospel: who is Jesus? Over and over and over again in Luke’s Gospel, people have asked, “Who is Jesus?” His parents asked it when the prophet Simeon declared that Jesus was God’s salvation for all the peoples. The Pharisees asked it when Jesus started forgiving people’s sin. Even John the Baptist asked it when he heard of Jesus’ incredible miracles.

People wondered who Jesus was, but Jesus never did. He knew exactly who he was. When he was a 12 year old boy, he stayed behind in Jerusalem after his family left because he had to be in the Temple, God’s dwelling place among Israel, which he called “his *Father’s* house”. At his baptism, Jesus heard God himself declare “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” And now, we see Jesus confidently wielding his divine authority to forgive sin, showing the world that he wasn’t just a human saviour. He was a divine one.

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, but he doesn’t forgive the sins of all. He only forgives the sins of those who put their faith in him. This is why he doesn’t forgive the sins of the Pharisees, but he does forgive the sins of the woman, and he assures her of his forgiveness in verse 50 by telling her, “Your *faith* has saved you; go in peace.”

It wasn’t her love for Jesus that saved her. Jesus didn’t say, “Your love has saved you; go in peace.” He says, “Your *faith* has saved you.” Faith in Jesus is the only basis upon which we can ever be saved from God’s punishment of our sins. Not good intentions, not good works, not even great love. Faith saves us, and faith alone.

The woman believed that Jesus could forgive her sins, but she didn’t know how he would do that. Jesus hadn’t yet revealed this to anyone up to this point in Luke’s gospel. But for those who know their Bibles, you know how Jesus would ultimately forgive. Forgiveness isn’t granted merely with the words, “Your sins are forgiven.” Forgiveness is granted only when our penalty is paid. Jesus is able to forgive sins because he paid the penalty for the sins of all who put their faith in him by dying on the cross. On the cross, he died the death that we deserved, so that we could live the life that he deserved. He takes our unpayable debt and pays it in full with his own life.

The woman didn’t know that her forgiveness would cost Jesus his life, and yet she loved him with an extravagant love. How much more should we love him? We know not only that he forgives our sins, but that this forgiveness costed Jesus everything. Such extravagant love calls for a response of extravagant love.

Love will always be the fruit of true faith. Jesus says this in verse 47, “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much.” Jesus looked at the woman’s love and saw her faith beneath it. Love was the sign that true faith in him abided in her, and love must be the sign that true faith abides in us as well.

**CONCLUSION**

Jesus has one question for all of us today: what does your love for Jesus look like? Does it look like the love of the sinful woman? Or does it look like the love of the Pharisee? If Jesus were here, how would we respond to him? With cold indifference like the Pharisee? Or with tears and kisses like the woman?

Jesus wants all of us to love him with the extravagant love of the woman, to show our love for him as we feel our love for him. That doesn’t just come from trying harder. It comes from a deep, consistent, and serious meditation on our own sinfulness.

If you want to grow in your love for Jesus, then make it a regular discipline to reflect on your own sins. Don’t just think about the wrong things you’ve done. Think about the right things you’ve failed to do. After you’ve thought long and hard about those sins, don’t stop there. Think about your sinful thoughts and your sinful feelings. Think about that moment where you felt a flicker of anger at your child’s behaviour. Think about that fleeting thought you had about the woman you saw at the grocery store. Think about your desire to make much of yourself and your lack of desire to make much of God.

And when you’ve thought deeply and seriously about your sin, then remember that all those sins have been completely erased on the cross. All your sins, past, present, and future, cannot leave even a single spot on the purity with which God now sees you because of the death of Christ on your behalf. Believe that. Put your faith in Jesus. Know his great love for you, so that your love may be great for him.

Love for Jesus only grows through the consistent recognition and confession of our sin. We need this to become a habit, but the thing about habits are that they take time to form. So let’s start this week. Spend time every day confessing your sin, meditating deeply not just on sinful actions and inactions, but sinful thoughts and feelings. If you’re like me, you may not want to go there, because you’re afraid that confronting all your sins will be too much to bear. But don’t be afraid! God knows all your sins already, and he does not condemn you. Through your faith in Christ, and through your faith alone, God has forgiven you completely.

Knowledge of our sin is the only path to a deeper knowledge of God’s love, and knowledge of God’s love is the only way for us to grow in our love for Jesus.

May Jesus come to receive from us the love that he deserves as we become more and more aware of his great love for us.