

How does Jesus relate to people who come to him overwhelmed by their spiritual ugliness?

A few years ago, Amy and I heard a woman named Cassandra tell her story. She said when she was 27 years old. After being trapped for ten years in a life of abuse and selling herself: that life was done with her. She could finally leave the industry that had taken every last ounce of her dignity and self-worth.

She had nothing. She was at rock-bottom. She found a Bible and opened it. She turned her head to the heavens and cried out to God. "I'm desperate!" she said. "I've gotten myself into this terrible mess," she said. "My life has amounted to nothing," she said. She dropped to her knees and asked the Lord to either kill her or save her. At that point, even breathing was painful.

Now, let's pause the story so I can ask you a question: How do you think the Lord responded?

How does God relate to people who come to him overwhelmed by the ugliness of their souls?

That's one of the questions about God that our Bibles take up in Luke's Gospel about Jesus. Jesus shows us how God relates to sorry sinners. Luke's gospel specializes in this question. It's filled with stories where Jesus interacts with all types of people from all types of backgrounds.

So, before I tell you what happened to Cassandra. Open your Bibles and read Luke 7:36. We're going to meet another woman like Cassandra who knows what it's like to be overwhelmed by spiritual ugliness and sin. Who has come to Jesus. And Jesus will show us how God relates to sorry sinners.

This isn't a difficult story. But it is a great story. You could put this on stage and really grab people. I want us to hear it even better by paying attention to three themes: Forgiveness, Love, and Faith. We'll have a great answer to our question – How does God relate to sorry sinners – when we pay attention to forgiveness, love, and faith in this story.

A: FORGIVENESS

Would you agree with me that FORGIVENESS is the main point of this story? Look how Jesus resolves things and repeats himself in v.47-48 - "Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love as shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little. Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'" Forgiveness explains a lot in this story. It explains why this woman is acting so outrageously – she's been forgiven a mortgage load of sin. And it explains why Jesus isn't offended – he's ready to forgive.

Jesus is ready to forgive sorry sinners. He loves to welcome the broken-hearted who come to him. Forgiveness is bound up with his mission from the Father.

Can you think of other times Jesus has acted this way? Remember that dinner at Levi the Tax Collector's house in Luke 6? And the Pharisees ask: "Why do you eat and drink with these known sinners?" And Jesus says in 6:32 - "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." And remember the names they would call Jesus? In 7:34 Jesus recalls: "[People say of me] 'Here is a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'"

Forgiveness is bound up in Jesus' mission and plans for people. So, Jesus was friendly with sinners because he didn't see them as dangers but as opportunities. Every meal is an opportunity for forgiveness, and faith, and transformation. Simon dwells on her past. Jesus looks forward to what God will make of her.

Now look. Jesus was no friend of sin. Jesus was intolerant of the unrepentant. But, "no one in the history of the world has been more inclusive of the broken-hearted than Jesus" (K. DeYoung). He's ready to forgive.

How does this connect to our church? Listen to this: "What kind of doctor refuses to see patients? What kind of farmer refuses to get his hands dirty? What kind of church has no place for sinners?"

B: LOVE

To hear this story better we can also pay attention to what it says about love. People in The Prayer Course will be tuned to this already.

What does great forgiveness do to people? It leads to great love. Look what love did to this woman! Look at her in v.37. What do you see? Love has given her guts. She shows up in a place where she isn't welcome. Love has made her self-less. She's lost herself for Jesus. She's raining tears; she's a mess; she's using the most intimate parts of her to clean the lowliest parts of him. Love has also made her sacrificial. The most expensive perfume at Shopper's Drug Mart is something called Velvet Orchid. It's \$252. Don't use it all at once. She's pouring it. It's an enormous sacrifice. Her love is shocking.

Simon doesn't get it. But my neighbours don't get it, either. I didn't get it for a long time. You can talk up the uniqueness of Christ. The wisdom of God in scripture. The evidence for Christian faith. But until it becomes personal. Until reality sets in. Until God pops the lid and I see how wicked and offensive my heart is to God... and how great a forgiveness is ready for me... I won't get it.

People need feel the weight of sin before they'll love what Christ has done for them.

It's a battle. Our culture has lost the notion of personal sin. Our world has new names for what ails us: poor self-esteem, neurosis, addiction, anxiety, psychological wounding. It isn't that these issues aren't a reality; it's they don't go deep enough to reveal the root cause.

My sin is odious to God. Your sin is ugly. The New City Catechism says: "Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in the world he created, rebelling against him by living without reference to him, not being or doing what he requires in his law—resulting in our death and the disintegration of all creation."

Becky Pippert says: "Sin could be described as having a *God-complex*: we get ourselves and God mixed up! We live as if we're in charge."

The Ology says: "Sin—it's the scariest, Sin hurts everyone; Sin—how it hides in us, It's all the wrong we've done; It separates us from our God behind these prison walls; Oh, sin is the scariest of all."

God spent 1500 years in the Old Testament to let this sink in. Don Carson writes... "The fact that [the Old Testament law] should reign for almost a millennium and a half shows how important it was to God to get across the persistence, repetition, heinousness, enslaving power, and odium of human sin and the utter incapacity of human beings to break free from it."

No one is in need of a little forgiveness. It's great forgiveness that we need. It's great forgiveness Jesus offers. And it's great forgiveness that leads to great love.

C: FAITH

Forgiveness. Love. One last theme to pay attention to. This is a story about faith. The final word from Jesus in this story is about faith. Jesus says in v.50, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Here's a question: When did this woman put her faith in Jesus? When were this woman's sins forgiven? When was she saved?

Not until the end of the story do we learn that this woman was saved at some time before she walked in the room. This woman – as v.47 tells us – was already trusting Jesus for forgiveness. She's already responded to the message of Jesus with faith. This isn't her conversion story. This is her assurance story. Her love is proof of what has already taken place in her life.

Faith is the last verse in the story. But it's the first part of the story. Her faith is the starting point. She trusts Jesus' message. Is forgiven of her sin. Is overcome with love and gratitude. And goes to Jesus. Who tells her it's all true. She's forgiven. Her faith has saved her. Faith is the starting point. God doesn't forgive you more if you love him more. Faith receives all the forgiveness you need. Love is the response.

The Freedom Christ Offers is Unparalleled

So, that's the story of a shameful woman forgiven. Let me turn back to Cassandra now. I want you to hear how God responded to her.

She says... "I dropped to my knees and I asked the Lord to either kill me or save me because at that point even breathing was excruciating for me. Something changed that day, and I stopped feeling the extreme emotions that had been plaguing me. He took the "overwhelming" away from me and carried that burden Himself. The freedom that I felt that day, and every day since, is unparalleled."

"After getting out of the industry in 2004, I spent two years healing physically and emotionally, getting to know myself and God. After this time of healing, I realized that I had to go back to the women and girls I knew from before and tell them about the freedom and hope that I had found in Jesus. I wanted to tell them that nothing else would solve their problems. God did not give me so much a heart for the girls, but a heart for him. That is how I love the women and girls with whom I used to work. I introduce them to Jesus. Only He will give them true freedom."

Jesus is still ready to forgive! The story's still true. A recognition of personal sin. The offer of great forgiveness. Faith. Then gutsy, selfless, sacrificial love. For Jesus.