

The Religious

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[0 : 00] My name is Jeremy. People in the back, can you see me? Awesome. And I'm one of the staff here in Watermark. And it's a pleasure to be with you this morning.

And we're actually going to start a new series. So for those of you who haven't really been journeying with us the last few months, we've actually started in the new year with Deuteronomy, which is a book in the Old Testament, a very foundational book.

And this week, we're going to start a new series called Sinners Jesus Met. Now, there's a link there, though, which is very important. In Deuteronomy, we explored God's call to his people, Israel, if you remember.

The call was to be this unique nation, a nation that reflected God's love, his brilliance, his character, his light, reflecting that light to a dark and broken world.

That was a call that this community of people in Deuteronomy received. But if you've read the Old Testament, and when you read the Old Testament, you find that, sadly, most of it is just story after story about how Israel failed, how they could not live up to that purpose, that call, and how they could not do it.

[1 : 21] And so, by the time we get to the New Testament, in this passage that Gabriel just read for us, the time of Jesus' ministry and his life, we find, unfortunately, that the people of Israel are still very much failing.

They're failing to live up to God's purpose. And the word that we often use for that is the word sin. Sin. And so, we see that in the New Testament, in the Gospels, Jesus interacted with many of these sinners, many of these people of Israel.

And so, this new series will profile a number of these sinners. And we believe that God will use these stories to reveal that every one of us has these characteristics of sin in our own lives.

In essence, every one of these sinners that Jesus met is you and me. This series is a bridge from Deuteronomy to our next series, which is the Book of Acts.

You see, the God-given purpose that God had called his people Israel to do, they failed. But Jesus comes.

[2 : 39] Jesus comes and fulfills all the purposes that God had put on his people. And so, as these sinners encountered Jesus, they were liberated.

They were transformed. They were empowered. And we'll see as we move on to Acts later. This is the church that is full of the Spirit, full of empowerment, that begins to live out the calling that Israel failed.

So, there's that overarching kind of narrative. You just want to keep it in mind. So, Deuteronomy, the bridge that is Jesus that we're looking at right now. And we're looking forward to Acts in about a month's time.

So, as we look at these stories, our hope is that we'll begin to see the depth and the breadth of our sinfulness in new and unique ways. And I'm excited, not because I like thinking about my failure.

I don't know if many people do. But because I know that God loves me and he loves us. And as we see our sinfulness more clearly, I believe we'll also see God's love more clearly.

[3 : 47] And as we meet Jesus in these powerful, profound ways, we'll realize that we as the people of God can actually begin to live out that purpose.

We as watermark can actually begin living out the purpose that he's called us to. So, let me pray for us, pray for myself before we begin.

Lord, I just thank you for this amazing story that you've captured for us this morning of Simon the Pharisee and Jesus and the woman. I pray, Lord, that you would just open our ears, open our hearts, including my own, Lord.

Lord, this is an exercise not of me preaching to an audience, Lord, but of your words speaking into all of our hearts, God. So, this morning, I pray that we would just focus on you, Lord. We would just be attentive to you, what you are speaking into our hearts. God, let us be still right now. Let us know that you are with us, that you are ready and willing to speak to us.
[5 : 00] Lord, give us ears to hear and hearts to receive. In Jesus' name, amen. Okay, so let's dig in.

And in today's fascinating episode of Sinners That Jesus Met, Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus into his home. Okay, everyone got that?

Jesus, now this, Jesus was this famous prophet at this time who had been going around the country, wowing people, like amazing people with his teaching and his miracles and his healings that Ed had mentioned.

And if you've read, who's read this account before? If you've read it, I have too. If you've read it, chances are your natural inclination is to focus on the woman.

Or maybe not, but I know definitely that was mine because she's kind of like the one doing all this stuff, right? But Simon, I would say, is just as much a central character because he represented a significant group in society back then and today.

[6 : 11] And who was Jesus speaking to for most of it? He was actually speaking to Simon. So today we're really going to look into Simon and his psyche and his character and see what is it about Simon that reflects us.

So we know that Simon is a Pharisee. What do we know about Pharisees? Well, at the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were a group of religious people. They were religious leaders.

And what they did was they explored and they interpreted and they researched the Old Testament laws, the laws that we learned about in Deuteronomy in the previous series. And what was happening at this time was they were under Roman occupation, these kind of foreign Gentile, nasty rulers.

And the Pharisees really couldn't do much about that. They really couldn't fight them away or anything. But what they could do and what they developed this idea that, okay, if we were just very piously and diligently followed every little aspect of the law, then maybe we could somehow fulfill God's purpose for Israel.

Maybe if I interpreted all these specific laws and I followed them meticulously, I could fulfill my purpose. So they looked at tithing their income.

[7 : 33] It's something we looked about last series, if you remember. Tithing your income, basically giving a tenth of your income. And they took that principle and took it to the point of tithing even their garden herbs.

I don't know if many guys grow herbs in your gardens in Hong Kong, but it's just like, you know, just little bits of vegetable. And they were tithing that as well because they felt, if I tithe that, maybe I can fulfill the principle of tithing better.

Most people fasted once in a while. The Pharisees fasted twice a week, religiously. Diligently. And on and on it went.

There's so many examples of these principles. So Simon, this Pharisee, invites the prophet Jesus into his home for a fancy ceremonial banquet.

And we know it's a ceremonious kind of thing because the scripture says they reclined at the table. And that was a thing that you did in a formal occasion like that, to recline at the table.

[8 : 40] I don't know how good that is for eating, but that's what they did. They reclined. So he was actually on his side, I guess. And the dining table in that culture, in Jewish culture, was one of the most intimate social settings you could have.

So when you dined with something, dined with someone, that meant something. That was important. And Simon, by inviting Jesus into his home, shows that he believes or he feels that he is in some way equal to Jesus.

That he can actually be okay in Jesus' presence. That he is accepted by Jesus, or he wouldn't have invited Jesus in the first place. And of course, Simon has every reason to think that he's a good man according to his religion.

I mean, he's a Pharisee. He's a respected religious leader. He's been tithing his garden herbs all week. But Simon's initial actions in this story reveal something interesting.

So picture with me, a woman enters into a room, a stranger, looking for Jesus. Now, this isn't that weird. It's not like you're at home having dinner with your family, and someone just walks in and sits down with you.

[10:05] Because ceremonial dinners at this time, in this culture, were actually semi-public affairs. And it would not have been unusual for people to kind of come in, gather in the room, sit around by the walls, and kind of just listen in.

Kind of become an audience to the centerpiece, which is the official guests who are talking and discussing things. So there's almost kind of a little show atmosphere there. So it's not that unusual that this woman, this stranger, came in to observe and listen.

But something stands out about her, right? She's a sinner, the text says. Which means that she is publicly known for doing some kind of wrong.

Publicly known. She has this alabaster flask of ointment, which is actually expensive perfume. She positions herself at Jesus' feet, a place of humility.

She's weeping for some reason. And as her tears fall on his feet, she wipes them with her hair and anoints them with her perfume.

[11:23] This is a complete gong show. It's crazy. You know, in that culture, sinners were not supposed to be interacting with holy prophets.

It was incredibly inappropriate in that culture for a woman to let down her hair. Incredibly inappropriate. It's like I've read one commentator said it might have been even on par to, like, you know, be nudity in some respects.

It was that inappropriate. But up to this point, Jesus doesn't do anything except kind of passively receive the woman's actions.

He's silent. He's passive. And this surprises, maybe even annoys the host. Seeing the spectacle, Simon says to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who's touching him.

What sort of woman this is that's touching him. For she is a sinner. You see, Simon is actually judging Jesus, this supposed prophet, for not responding with the judgments and discernment that Simon wants.

[12:53] This sinful woman had no business interrupting their meal like this, breaking the customs of the land like this. So one of the key characteristics we can see from the Pharisees was their clear sense of hierarchy.

Hierarchy between good, bad, better, worse, insider, outsider. It was very clear to them. The Pharisee thinks he is the one with all these important values and rules and principles that he's following.

All those things that he's sort of distilled from the Old Testament. And he instinctively uses himself to compare others to him.

Think about it with me. The Pharisee cannot be positive that he's perfectly following all of his principles, right? He can't be sure 100% that he is really following God.

Because no one can. The man even gives a tenth of his herbs. But is that enough? Is there something else he should tithe? And on and on it goes.

[14:07] He can never be 100% sure. So the best way to have that security, to know, to feel right, to feel good, is to compare himself with the obvious sinners in culture.

Later in the Gospel of Luke, you also read that Jesus tells a parable where the Pharisee is praying, God, I thank you that I'm not like the other people.

The robbers, the evildoers, the adulterers, or even this tax collector. That's the prayer of thanksgiving that the Pharisee gives.

So what Simon thinks when he sees other people is revealed in this thought that is recorded in the passage today. He thinks what sort of woman this is.

What sort of woman this is. What's her category? What is her label? She's a sinner. And he even does this with Jesus. He looks at Jesus and all he's thinking about is, is this guy really a prophet?

[15:16] Is he really a prophet? Is he really a prophet? So let me ask you guys a question today. Are you religious? Show of hands, who would consider themselves religious here?

Yeah, not after that description of Simon, right? It's okay. You can answer in your own heart. Now, those of you who are thinking, well, Jeremy, well, that depends what you mean by religious, right?

Well, how do you define that word? And then you guys are thinking like good lawyers. Because you're not really committing or deciding anything before you really have analyzed it.

So you're welcome. I've gone ahead and I've done the hard work for you. I've found the broadest dictionary definition of the word religion. And here it is.

Are you ready? Religion can be defined as a cause, a principle, or a system of beliefs held to with passion and faith.

[16:17] Thank you, Miriam Webster. So based on this definition of religion, I think every single person in here is religious.

Because every one of us lives according to a cause, a principle, or a system of beliefs, don't we? Every one of us has been shaped by our upbringings and our cultural influences.

Each and every one of us has values, has ideals, has morals, has rules and standards, don't we? And I think whether explicitly or implicitly, we believe those things are good or we wouldn't be following it, right?

So even if you don't have your religion written out in a book or your dear diary or something, it's still in there in your mind, in your hearts, in your beliefs.

So I was thinking about the religion of Jeremy Tam as I was writing the sermon. That's me, in case you didn't realize. And I figured out a few principles. And they're in no particular order.

[17:30] None of these are actually written anywhere, unless I've forgotten. And not all of them are equally important to me. But if I'm honest, they are all important principles in some way that I adhere to, that I live according to.

So I was typing on my computer and I realized, gosh, it's important for me to have my computer files organized in a logical and coherent manner. It is. Some of you guys can sort of amen to that. And some of you guys with your desktop just littered with folders and files that aren't even arranged in rows. You know, I would look at your laptop and I would judge you.

And it would make me very uncomfortable to borrow your laptop. Another thing, it's important to look presentable when I go out. It's important to tell the truth.

It's important to get particular grades in school, in seminary. It's important to have a particular status in society. It's very important to believe that I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins.

[18:36] And I could go on and on with these different types of principles and ideals and rules. But this is the interesting thing, guys. The hallmark of the Jeremy Tam religion is that it's ultimately about me.

It says it in the name itself. And if you noticed, every one of those principles I listed is centered around me.

Even my belief that Jesus died for my sins, I can express that as something that's up to my ability to believe. My effort to believe. To believe more.

To believe more passionately. How well I believe. And so the Jeremy Tam religion is ultimately about how well I live out my principles and beliefs.

And every one of us does the same for our own personal religions. You may say, Jeremy, but what if my principle is to love and to serve others?

[19:38] Right? That sounds very altruistic. And that sounds great. I commend you for that. But if you're honest, I think it's still ultimately about how well you love.

And how well you serve. And the same for me. It's your religion. And this is what I would call a self-centered religion.

A self-centered religion. And by definition, this religion is about ourselves. What we do. What we think. It's the way we know that we're doing well in life.

Right? The way we can feel good about ourselves. We make rules. We modify those rules. We add those rules. As time goes by. But those are the things we know.

The things that make us sane. Those are goals that when we achieve, we feel like we are valuable. We are important. So does self-centered religion sound familiar to you?

[20:38] Imagine with me that you and your best buddies organize this great party. You know, it could be a house party, karaoke party, whatever floats your boat.

And you've dressed to impress. You're looking good. You've invited all your friends and your colleagues. And even your boss is there because you want to leave a great impression on her. You want to show her that you're ready for the big leagues. You're ready for that promotion. You know how to handle a social situation. You want her to be impressed. So this party is going and it's

great.

But out of the blue, out of the corner of your eye, you see Jeremy. That annoying intern that nobody really likes. He's kind of weird. Sometimes he even smells a bit.

He's not that good at his job. He's okay. And in your mind, you're thinking to yourself, Ugh! How did he find out about this party? And as you're chatting and laughing with your boss, showing off your stuff, your worst nightmare comes true because you see him kind of like scurrying over in your direction.

[21 : 50] And then he basically interjects into the conversation and starts talking to your boss. And even worse, your boss seems to be okay with that. She's talking back to him.

She's laughing. She's enjoying the conversation. And you're mortified. He's ruined your groove. Jeremy has ruined your plan. Who is this? Who does he think he is?

Does he not know his place? Does that scenario ring a bell at all for you? Maybe some of you can never imagine hosting a party with work friends.

God forbid, right? But how about any social setting in your life? Who is that social pariah, that outcast, that modern-day sinful woman in your life?

We all have at least one. And if it's not one person, it's a type of person. It's a group of people in your own society, in the broader society of Hong Kong, and in this world.

[22 : 59] Just be honest with yourself. Who is that to you? I work for a church, so to be honest, like one of mine that's kind of ingrained in me day after day that I have to fight against is people who aren't apparently as devoted to God as I am.

That's a sinful woman to me. You see, every person is religious in your own way. And when they encounter people who are so different, so far from their standards, that fall so much outside of their sense of what is good, we put this big fat label on them, and they just don't see that this person is really a person.

They don't see the person. They see the label. They see the category. They see the other. This is the folly of self-centered religion.

But Jesus sees right through Simon the Pharisee. Jesus sees right through us. He's a prophet. He's God. And he tells us a parable of two people who owe money to a moneylender.

One debt is about the equivalent of two months' wages. The other debt is closer to about two years of wages.

[24 : 29] So these are both significant sums. And when neither of them can repay, the lender decides to graciously cancel all the debts.

He cancels it. Puts it on himself. He takes the blow. Who do you think, Jesus asked, Who do you think will love the moneylender more?

And I want you guys to notice here that there's no specific word in Hebrew or Aramaic for thanks or gratitude. So I think the idea of love here is actually more comprehensive.

It's not just love, but there's this thankfulness. There's this sense of gratefulness into this. So who do you think will love the moneylender more?

And Simon answers correctly. The one whose debt was larger. And this is when Jesus literally shifts our perspective.

[25 : 28] He turns to the woman. He puts the attention on her, the focus on her. The woman who was an outcast up until now.

He puts her in a place of honor by looking at her, focusing on her. And naturally, the whole room would have done the same. But he's still talking to Simon.

And he says, Simon, do you see this woman? Church, do you see this woman?

Interesting. Of course Simon saw the woman. Duh. She's the whole reason for his frustration, why he's feeling so vexed.

But did Simon truly see her for who she really was? Did he see a person made in God's image?

[26 : 23] Did he see a person broken and hurting from being a social outcast? Searching for purpose and forgiveness? Or did he just see her sin and the fact that she was so different from him?

Do you really see that person in your social setting, that group of people that came to your mind?

Not for their reputations, not for their behavior or their past, but do you see them for who they are in God's eyes?

Then Jesus says, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. And notice here that the woman's love is not the cause of forgiveness.

Her love is the evidence that she has already been forgiven. Because the debt that was graciously canceled by the money lender, the debtor now responds with overwhelming love and thanksgiving and gratitude.

You see, Jesus makes it clear that the folly of self-centered religion must be replaced by Jesus, by Christ-centered religion.

[27 : 47] What do I mean by that? See, Jesus says afterwards, he who is forgiven little loves little. He who is forgiven little loves little.

Now this could be a reference to Simon, but don't take it to mean that Simon actually sinned little, and therefore, you know, he didn't need to respond with as much love, because he wasn't forgiven as much.

This isn't fully captured in the English translation, but Jesus actually switches here to the present tense when he says this. He makes it clear that while the woman has been forgiven, and therefore has loved in response, there's no indication that Simon is also forgiven.

And Jesus is saying this to Simon because the problem with his self-centered religion, the problem with our self-centered religion, is that he cannot help but to compare himself with others.

He was using himself as the standard. He was condemning the woman. He was the one comparing the two amounts of debt in the first place, and the parable exposed that.

[29 : 00] But Christ-centered religion comes into the picture and changes the dynamic completely. It turns it upside down. Because each of us must give an account to the money lender, not to each other.

It's meaningless to compare debts, because as soon as you do it, you've already missed the point. It's not about whose debt is bigger.

So if you think, like Simon perhaps did, that you've been forgiven less, you will love God less, and chances are, church, that you and I haven't really understood forgiveness at all.

The scripture says that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. We fail to perfectly love the God who created us. And the consequence of that sin is death.

So if the penalty for defaulting on any amount of payment is death, the death penalty, then really does it even matter who has a greater amount of debt?

[30 : 12] No. We're all dead. We're all in the grave. We judge those outsiders in our lives, our society, and how big their debts are.

God looks at all of us and sees that we're all outcasts. Self-centered religion is like orphans fighting over who deserves the best scraps, the best leftovers, when God is offering us adoption and a banquet feast every day.

Christ-centered religion is about trusting in what Jesus does when he cancels our unpayable debts. He takes the debt upon himself and he welcomes us as children of God.

So if you're following me here, we have self-centered religion, which is overturned by Christ-centered religion. And our last point today is how we respond to Jesus.

You see, the interesting thing, the interesting thing about Simon the Pharisee is that his treatment of Jesus wasn't actually that bad. It's a misconception to kind of look at him and say, ooh, you know, bad, bad host.

[31 : 35] What a bad host. He was out of line. No. Because in his culture, there was no mandatory obligation for a host to offer foot-washing water or a kiss of greeting or anointing oil.

There was no obligation for him to do that. Simon is actually courteous to Jesus. He even calls him teacher, which is a title of honor and respect.

But here's the thing. His response, his treatment of Jesus, although culturally appropriate, showed that Simon did not understand the depths of his own sinfulness.

I wonder how many of us are like that. Do we just respect Jesus as a nice teacher who helps us with this little sin when we're struggling with it or this little sin or this problem or this goal that we can't reach in life?

Is he kind of like an ad hoc teacher that you just bring in once in a while, a consultant? Do we offer him like the bare minimum of our worship from week to week when we come in on Sundays to serve throughout the weeks in your community groups?

[32 : 49] Do you only serve him when it's convenient for you? Do you, I don't know, do you get anxious about whether your tithe or your offering should be on your net income or your gross income or something in between?

You know, is church and religion just a checklist of things that you need to do that you need to figure out, that you need to meticulously parse like the Pharisees did so that you can feel like, okay, I've done enough.

And if you're subconsciously thinking or feeling, I don't feel that bad, Jeremy, I don't feel that bad. I think I'm okay. My question to you is this, by whose standard?

Yours? The woman's? Or God's? You see, by very nature, some form of Simon the Pharisee lives in all of us.

And this story is God's gracious reminder for us to examine our love. You see, the woman understood the magnitude, the magnitude of her sin and her love for Jesus was appropriately massive.

[34 : 05] So here's what I want to do. Using the woman's actions as categories, I want to take us in these final moments to reflect on how we respond to Jesus.

The woman greets Jesus with kisses, which was appropriate back then as a cultural thing. Have you ever greeted Jesus with kisses, welcoming him into your life?

Not just as a good teacher, but as an absolute Lord over your life. A savior who brings you from death to life.

Whether you consider yourself a Christian or not this morning, is this the day for you to welcome Jesus into your life to the extent that that woman did?

If you accept that complete forgiveness from God today, I encourage you, don't leave this place without telling me or somebody else, the person who brought you, because that's huge.

[35 : 13] That's the beginning of new life, of adoption into God's family. And if something's stopping you from making that decision or you still have doubts or questions, please come chat with me or any one of the leaders.

I'd love to talk to you about that. If you want, if you're searching and you're still on this journey, we have the Alpha Course starting tomorrow. It's this amazing opportunity to explore Christianity in a safe, judgment-free environment.

So the woman wept. Sorry, the woman, she greeted Jesus. Now she wept as well. Number two, when was the last time you felt that deep, gut-wrenching emotion from the bottom of your stomach that just turned?

And maybe you even wept. Maybe you even wept a lot of tears and you cried out to God because you grieved over your sin and you rejoiced over God's forgiveness.

When have you felt that last? Have you ever? Church, I confess I have been a Christian for so long that oftentimes, you know, I just think I'm fine.

[36 : 30] You know, I'm okay. I know God loves me. I'm okay. When have you felt it? When's the last time you felt it? The woman wiped Jesus' feet.

When was the last time you were so focused on serving God that you did something on par with the woman letting down her hair? A total cultural bomb.

What she did was basically social suicide. But today, I still get concerned about whether I'm doing something too extreme in church or amongst my friends.

When was the last time or is there something in your heart that you want to do that it's just that you would, the culture will look down and say, that's weird, that's stupid. When was the last time you did something like that because you were so enamored, so in love with the Christ, the Messiah who saved you?

Finally, when was the last time you did something so extravagant and so costly for God? Like breaking open that alabaster jar of perfume.

[37 : 50] I admit sometimes I, most of the time, I serve out of my abundance. I serve out of my wealth. And there's no real sacrifice.

There's no real cost. So if there's something that comes to your mind right now, write it down.

Remember it. What is something costly that God calls you to do because of his love for you?

Guys, if you haven't seen any of that evidence in your life, I want you to listen to me very carefully. I am not challenging you to go and do lots of religious stuff now.

That's what the Pharisees do. What I am inviting you to do is to really think, meditate, think again about who Jesus Christ is to you.

He who loves little, he who loves little is probably spending too much time comparing himself to others and too little time comparing himself to Jesus.

[39 : 03] the one who created you, Jesus, the one who created you and I to reflect his perfect character. The one who knows every dirty, ugly, shameful little thought that has ever crossed your mind.

The one who knows every selfish, ungodly thing that has ever happened in your life, both publicly and privately. yet is the one who still loves you and died on that cross to forgive your sins. How will you respond to him? Let's pray. Father, I thank you that in this story as the woman comes to you in recognition of her brokenness, she comes with reckless abandon knowing that it is your opinion, Jesus, your opinion, your standard alone that matters.

I thank you that as she came, as she wept, as she served, as she loved, the people around the room saw that and they marveled, they wondered, who is this Jesus who even forgives sins?

So God, I pray that your Holy Spirit would convict us now and speak into our lives what is the next step for every one of us to take. And above all, I pray that that next step would not be because we are like Pharisees who just want to be better, who just want to be better than the person next to us.

[40 : 57] But that next step, Lord, would come because we see the cross, we see how much you love us, we see the debt that was canceled. And everything is a reaction to you, God.

I pray that that would happen for every single one of us in this room and that we would walk out being ready to take the next step, that we would sing these next songs responding, knowing that you are calling us to something greater.

and I pray like in this story that the people around us, the people of Hong Kong, the people of our workplaces, our families, our city, would see that and they would also say, wow.

They would marvel and say, who is this Jesus who forgives sins, that incites this kind of passion and transformation in these people?

God, would you shine that light into our hearts right now? Would your spirit bring conviction and truth into our lives?

[42 : 01] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.