

Luke 7:36-50

Jesus is not very respectable

*Tim Anderson 23/4/17*

I might start with a few words about preaching generally before I dive into the passage for today.

When I preach, I'm aiming to help us to hear God's word.

We've had the Bible read.

The object of the sermon is to help us understand it with our minds, to help us to want to obey it with our wills, and to help us to respond to it with our hearts.

Hopefully that's not a surprise to you.

Most of the time when I preach,

I'm working through books of the Bible.

God chose to reveal his Word to us in books.

preaching through books of the Bible

respects God's choice in how he revealed himself.

We shouldn't take it for granted that the Bible is in books.

If you were a Muslim reading the Koran, it's in isolated verses.

One verse don't necessarily relate

to the verse before or the verse afterwards.

Having God's word in books helps us to understand it because the story explains itself as it goes along - just like any other book.

When I preach, I choose books from the whole Bible.

Gospels and Epistles.

New Testament and Old Testament.

The church I attended when I was a teenager, the minister always preached on the Gospel reading.

But if God has revealed himself to us in all of the Scriptures, we would be missing out on some of the blessings that God has for us, if we didn't open up the various parts of the Bible over time.

That said, we're going to begin with Luke's gospel for the first couple of months.

The title of the series is

"Jesus is not very Christian".

Which is a slightly provocative way of encouraging us to explore whether the real Jesus is just like the picture of him that we carry in our heads.

Here are the titles of the sermons in the series.

Jesus is not very respectable.

Jesus is not very accommodating

Jesus is not very polite.

Jesus is not very nice.

Jesus is not very practical.

Jesus is not very family friendly.

Jesus is not very fair.

Jesus is not very religious.

I'm sure you will agree with me that a Christian person ought to be a respectable, accommodating, polite, nice, practical, family friendly, fair and religious person.

And over the next couple of months,

I'm going to show you that Jesus is none of those things.

Which is clear proof that Jesus is not very Christian.

At least not very much like our stereotypes of what it means to be Christian.

The passages that are going to show us that Jesus is not very Christian are all from Luke's gospel.

So there's no doubt that they paint a true picture of Jesus.

He was without doubt "not very Christian".

Now how could it be that the founder of Christianity, could be found to be not very Christian?

How could that be?

The answer must be that somewhere along the way, someone has changed Christianity.

I mean Jesus must have been Christian originally, mustn't he?

Christianity began as people following him,  
modelling their lives on his.

So originally, Christianity can't have been respectable, accommodating,  
polite, nice, practical, family friendly, fair or religious.

Because Christianity started as people copying Jesus,  
and Jesus was none of those things.

But somewhere along the line Christianity has changed.

It's stopped being about following Jesus,  
and started being about something else.

So in this series

we are going to face the challenge to get back to following Jesus.

Forget about what is popularly perceived as being Christian  
and get back to following Jesus.

Today our title is

"Jesus is not very respectable."

In the incident we read,

Simon the Pharisee is scandalised

because Jesus is willing to accept the attentions of a sinful woman.

That's just not respectable behaviour.

If you are respectable,

you don't spend time with low life.

You make sure you surround yourself with upstanding pillars of society.

In fact the company you keep is a mark of how respectable you are.

And we know that not much has changed

from first century Israel to twenty first century Australia.

Your reputation for respectability still rests

on the company you choose to keep rather than on your own character.

The people I've heard complain most loudly about this

are members of the God's Squad motor cycle club.

These are people, mostly men, of outstanding character.

But they choose to grow long hair, wear leathers,

and hang around with people from other motorcycle clubs

many of whom have frankly quite undesirable characters.

And the folks from the God's Squad

find that they are not so welcome in some Christian circles.  
Because some Christians value respectability  
more than they value following Jesus.

Well what do we discover from Luke 7  
about Jesus' attitude to respectability?

It starts with a dinner invitation from a Pharisee named Simon to Jesus.

The Pharisee is the respectable person.

He's the one looked up to as a model of what right living looks like.

And Jesus accepts the dinner invitation.

So there's no reverse snobbery operating.

Occasionally you meet Christians

who are so offended

by those who value respectability above following Jesus

that they actually won't have anything to do with them.

They are in fact just as exclusive

as the people they despise for being exclusive.

But Jesus is happy to accept the dinner invitation from the Pharisee.

And it wasn't just an ordinary dinner invitation

because they were reclining at the table.

Believe it or not, the normal way to eat dinner in first century Israel

was to sit at the table much like we do.

They only reclined at the table for a feast, a celebration.

So Simon the Pharisee had invited Jesus

to be a guest at a celebration meal he was having.

Now the thing about celebration meals in those days

was that you didn't need an invitation to come along.

The invited guests reclined at the table.

But other people could come along and sit in the background and watch.

They might be able to pick up

some scraps of the choice meal on the table.

Why did the wealthy hosts allow such an intrusion into their homes?

It was probably a way of making sure everyone knew

that their home was being graced by an honoured guest.

And so there came into the respectable home of Simon the Pharisee

a very disreputable guest.

Verse 37 tells us that she had lived a sinful life.

Now of course all of us live sinful lives in God's eyes.

In God's eyes this woman was no worse than you or me.

But in the eyes of her neighbours,

in the eyes of Simon the Pharisee,

she was a sinful woman.

What do you think?

Do you think she was a notorious gossip?

Of course not.

There are plenty of nasty malicious sins

that will never get you the reputation of being a sinful woman.

It would have to be something sexual.

Maybe she'd worked as a prostitute.

Maybe she'd been unfaithful to a husband or two.

Who knows?

But something scandal worthy.

Something that a respectable person would keep well clear of.

But she came to Simon's home

not in the hope of getting a morsel of fine food

from the rich man's table.

She had a more noble purpose in mind.

She had brought along some very expensive perfume.

How do I know it was very expensive?

Because they only put very expensive perfume in alabaster jars.

And her hope was to anoint Jesus with this perfume.

So you can imagine the scene.

Jesus is stretched out on some cushions facing the table,

as are the other guests.

His dirty feet are sticking out behind the table.

We know they are dirty feet

because Simon hadn't given him any water to wash them,

and the roads were dusty and the sandals didn't keep it out.

So the sinful woman comes up behind Jesus,

wanting to pour perfume on his feet.

Why did she want to do that?  
She was trying to honour Jesus  
in the most extravagant way she knew how.  
Why did she want to honour Jesus?  
Well Luke doesn't tell us, so we don't know for sure.  
And generally speaking I'm not a big fan  
of having a stab when the Bible doesn't tell us.  
But in this case,  
it does seem like there's one main reason she would want to do that.  
Jesus has somehow communicated to her  
love and acceptance.  
Everyone else has been judging this sinful woman.  
They've been communicating to her that she's not good enough for God.  
But Jesus has told her that God loves her,  
and that she can be forgiven for her many sins.  
Maybe she'd spoken to him the day before.  
Maybe she hadn't spoken to him,  
but something about Jesus communicated to her  
that this religious teacher unlike all the others  
was not going to reject her but would accept her.  
And after all the rejection and ostracism she had faced,  
she was overwhelmed with joy by Jesus' loving acceptance.  
She just wanted to do something for Jesus  
that would show how much she valued his acceptance.  
But the emotion of the moment overcame her.  
Instead of anointing his feet with perfume,  
at first all she could do was cry.  
She wept.  
Maybe tears of sorrow at the life she had led.  
Maybe tears of joy at being able to leave it behind.  
Probably a mixture of both.  
And her tears were making Jesus' dirty feet a bit muddy.  
She didn't have a wash basin and a towel.  
So she used what she had.  
Her hair.  
Now it was considered immodest in those days

for a woman to wear her hair down.  
So taking out her hair clip and unrolling her hair to wipe Jesus' feet  
was an edgy thing to do.  
A respectable woman would not have dreamed of doing it.  
And a respectable man would not have let her do it.  
But Jesus is not very respectable.  
And she stooped even lower,  
kissing his dirty feet.  
Which true had been wiped by her hair.  
But let's face it,  
that hadn't made them clean.  
You see if you can get all the dirt off with tears and hair.  
And then she did what she had come to do.  
She poured her expensive perfume on Jesus' feet.  
And Jesus let her do all that without protest or reproof.  
Jesus was a reader of people's hearts.  
He could see a heart filled with love.  
And he was not going to push away a loving heart.

Simon the Pharisee is another story.  
He's thinking to himself.  
Hold on a second.  
I've invited this guy to my place because he's reputed to be a prophet.  
But if he were a prophet,  
he would have insight from God  
that would let him know what kind of low life  
he's associating with here.

Well Jesus upset Simon's apple cart.  
Not only did what he said to Simon show  
that he did know exactly who the woman was,  
it also showed  
that he knew exactly what Simon had been muttering under his breath.  
Jesus knew who the sinful woman was.  
He knew that she was a disreputable type.  
And he showed love to her anyway.

And Jesus knew who Simon was,  
that he was an important respectable person in his town,  
and he ticked him off anyway.

What does that show us?

It shows us that Jesus doesn't evaluate people  
in the same way that people evaluate people.

People think,

this person is highly regarded,

if I hang around with them,

I might be highly regarded too.

Jesus doesn't need to curry favour with the well connected.

He is perfectly connected to his Father.

Jesus thinks,

this person is willing to turn away from their old life

towards a new life of loving and serving God.

I want to encourage that kind of a transformation.

How can I encourage her?

And so it should be in the church.

We don't look at the community and think to ourselves,

"Who are the respectable people in the community?"

Let's see if we can encourage them to come and be part of our church.

We hold out the offer of free forgiveness

for those who put their faith in Jesus.

And then we welcome all who respond with great joy.

And if some of those who respond to the gospel are not respectable,

well all the better.

Because that shows what great power the gospel has to transform lives.

And we shouldn't be surprised

if some of those who respond to the gospel are not respectable.

As Jesus teaches Simon the Pharisee,

The one who has had the bigger debt forgiven will love more.

Respectable people like Simon the Pharisee have a problem.

Very often they are blind to their own sin.

They can't see it because they are so respectable



that everyone thinks they are good.  
And so they start to kid themselves that they are good.  
But Simon the Pharisee needed to find forgiveness from Jesus  
just as much as the sinful woman.  
Think about all the sins Simon committed in this story.  
He questioned whether Jesus really was a prophet.  
And that betrayed his judgemental attitude towards the woman.  
He didn't extend basic courtesy to Jesus, his guest.  
If his heart was full of love,  
he would at least have given Jesus some water to wash his feet in  
when Jesus arrived.  
If a fellow Pharisee had been a guest of Simon's,  
you can bet your last denarius  
that he would have given him some water to wash his feet.  
And he would have kissed him in greeting.  
That's the normal way to greet a friend in that part of the world.  
Give them a kiss on each cheek.  
You see, he thought he was more important than Jesus,  
and he was scrutinising Jesus,  
when Jesus came around for a meal.  
He thought he didn't need to show Jesus  
the usual courtesies for an honoured guest,  
because Jesus was down the pecking order of importance.  
And that shows a proud heart.  
Pride that needs to be repented of and forgiven by God.  
Simon had plenty of sins to be forgiven.  
But he didn't recognise his sin.  
And so he didn't find forgiveness.  
But the sinful woman didn't need help recognising her sin.  
She knew she had stuffed up.  
And she was willing to put her trust in Jesus and find forgiveness.

And we will have the same experience.  
When we hold out the offer of free forgiveness,  
we will find that the people who know they need forgiving  
will be the ones who respond.

The respectable types  
will often tell you that they are happy with their life the way it is.  
If you see a church  
where everyone who comes along is a respectable type.  
Then you know that something has gone wrong.  
Somehow they have communicated the message  
that this is a club for respectable people,  
rather than this is a life boat for anyone who needs saving.  
That could be because of moralistic teaching from up the front.  
Or it could be communicated  
by the attitudes of those sitting in the pews.  
Or both.  
Either way, it's strenuously to be avoided.  
We follow Jesus.  
Jesus welcomed and showed love and acceptance to the disreputable.  
Jesus was called a friend of sinners.  
And those who said it meant it as an insult.

I wonder if you have any close friendships  
with people from a lower socio economic group in the community  
than you.  
If you're a professional,  
do you spend time with tradies?  
If you're a tradie,  
do you spend time with people who do menial jobs?  
If you do a menial job,  
do you spend time with people who are long term unemployed.  
If you are well educated,  
do you spend time with people who have not completed school?  
If you are wealthy,  
do you spend time with people who struggle to make ends meet?  
Have you spent significant time with people who have been to jail?  
It's the most natural thing in the world  
for people in our community to segment themselves  
into groups of people who are like they are.  
It's the most natural thing in the world.

But it's not following Jesus.  
Jesus hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors.

You know if you aren't spending time  
with people who are different to you,  
you aren't going to be able to hold out the offer of the gospel to them.

You might think to yourself,  
"I'm not like Simon the Pharisee.  
I'd be very happy to rejoice with the sinful woman  
who found forgiveness from Jesus."  
But let me tell you.  
It's one thing to say that.  
It's another thing to live intentionally like it's true.

If Simon the Pharisee had a heart like Jesus' heart,  
he would have invited the sinful woman  
to recline at the table with his other guests.  
That's a challenge.  
Some of the other guests who are very respectable  
might decide to go home early from the party.  
Are you ready to cope with that?  
Do you think it's worth the sacrifice to your reputation?

Jesus is not very respectable.  
Are you ready to follow a saviour like that?