

Religious Moderates vs Extremists

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 January 2020

Preacher: Vijay Henderson

[0 : 00] When it comes to religion and the rest of the world, good religion is moderate. Bad religion is extreme. That's the rule that religions are allowed to operate in Melbourne.

In our city, we can't push our views on other people. And so what's best is a moderate approach where I'm right and you're right. We're all right in our own ways. What we don't want is an extreme approach because that's when people don't get along.

And on the other side of things, the last thing we want is extremism. The term extremist is very loaded in our culture, isn't it? So a quick game of word association.

I say extremist. You say terrorism. Thank you. Great. Excellent. We don't want Melbourne to be full of religious extremists where we all disagree on fundamental issues, where we don't all agree that all paths are equally valid ways to God, where you tell me I'm wrong and I do the same to you.

Because extremism leads to everything from the Crusades and racism to ISIS and suicide bombers. Good religion, moderate. Bad religion, extreme.

[1 : 08] But to find out what God thinks, we come to a passage where Jesus meets a moderate and an extremist. And so if you could please keep your Bibles open, Luke 7, and the inside of your bulletin has a handout which tells you where we're going.

So we're going to look at the moderate first. I personally identify with the moderate. We grew up in an Anglican church in Camberwell. We attended every week. We said grace without dinner and prayers before bed.

We tried to be good and not bad, nice and moderate. Nothing wrong with that. But as we look at this passage, you may be surprised to find out what Jesus thinks.

Because Jesus is invited to eat dinner with a moderate, a Pharisee. We learn in verse 40 that his name is Simon. And because he's a Pharisee, it mustn't make us think that he's some sort of villain.

Like a, you know, like a pantomime. Remember in a pantomime? Where is he? Behind you, you know, this pantomime villain. We mustn't think that just because Simon is a Pharisee, that he is a villain. Pharisees were devout and observant Jews.

[2 : 16] They were morally upright. They were respectful. In verse 40, he calls Jesus teacher, a term of respect. And they tried to live by the rules of their religion. If you lived or worked next to Simon, he would be a kind and generous neighbor or colleague.

If he'd invited Simon to our family carols event, he would have said yes. He's probably been observing Jesus from a distance. And now he wants to find out more.

And so he invites him around to be the guest of honor at dinner. That is Simon the moderate. Now, point two, we get to the extremist. Verse 37.

A woman in that town who had lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house. I take it that as Luke was compiling his gospel, all the eyewitnesses knew exactly who she was.

And what they knew about her was that she had lived a sinful life. Some of the commentators speculate that she was the local prostitute, which I'm not sure about.

- [3 : 20] But what we do know about her is her sin. Even Jesus himself in verse 47 says that her sins were many. She's a sinful lady.
- And you can imagine the shock then when she crashes the dinner party. Much like today if the local drug dealer turned up at your house for breakfast. And she comes in and behaves like a mad person.
- And Luke slows the dinner down to describe her every action. Verse 37. She came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. That's the kind of ointment used for burials.
- It was so expensive it had to be kept in alabaster stone to protect it. Verse 38. As she stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears.
- Now, I don't cry just as a general rule. Not much anyway, but I don't cry that much. But I have never cried so much that I could wet feet with my tears.
- [4 : 21] But the word used for wet is the same for a rain shower. There is a downpouring of tears by this lady. Commercial quantities of tears.
- She's clearly overcome with emotion. It goes on. Then she wiped them with her hair. I lived in East London. And East London is very Middle Eastern.
- Extremely Middle Eastern, in fact. And all the moderate religious women there all cover their heads with scarves and things like that. But our woman here, she unravels her hair and wipes Jesus' unwashed feet with it.
- Back then, hot deserts. No sealed roads. Sandals, not shoes. Who knows how many centuries till someone invents socks. Camels and donkeys.
- They're the Toyota Corolla of the day. And so their mess is everywhere. But this says that the woman kissed Jesus' feet in a climate like that.
- [5 : 23] And all this is happening while Simon is trying to keep the dinner conversation going. I don't know what the strangest thing you've ever seen at a dinner party is. Last week, my family, we were away with Rachel, my wife's family, in the Midlands of Tasmania.
- And one night, we ate dinner without cutlery or plates. And we ate it off the table without, like, anything. So I've got a photo, Tina, of it. We served the rice off the table.
- You can see, and the meat was on the rice. And, you know, we ate. It was on banana leaves. It was really, it was very cool. And we ate with our hands. The children loved it. And my father-in-law on the right, he isn't so happy.
- I think you can see his face. He's an unreconstructed male. So he wasn't, he didn't know what was going on. Thank you, Tina. Have you ever been to a dinner party like that?
- Have you ever been to a dinner party where the host burnt the food? Or maybe spilled the food before it got to the table? Have you ever been to a dinner party where a husband and wife got in a public row in front of everyone?
- [6 : 30] Well, one day, Jesus went to a dinner party. And a crazy, sinful woman came in and washed his feet with her tears and cleaned them with her hair.
- In verse 39, moderate Simon, he's had enough. 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.
- You see, he wanted to learn more about Jesus. But his religious mind cannot understand how a holy prophet can allow a sinful woman to be near him, let alone touch him the way she does.
- The irony, of course, is that Jesus is a prophet and he can read Simon's thoughts and he answers him with a story. And this is our third point.
- Verse 40. Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher. Two people owed money to a certain money lender.

[7 : 34] One owed him 500 denarii and the other 50. Neither of them had the money to pay him back. And so he forgave the debts of both. Now, which of them will love him more? One denarii is a day's wage.

I think the footnote in your Bible says that. And I don't want to speculate in a room this powerful, but let's just call that \$300. And I put an equation on your handout. 500 denarii, 500 days wages.

Call it 150 grand. 50 denarii, 50 days wages. Call it 15 grand. It's your mortgage versus your credit card. Or it's your mortgage versus a student loan. They still have hex debts?

Hex debts. Anyway, there you go. Student debt. But verse 42 says, neither of them had the money to pay him back. And in their world, this isn't just an awkward conversation with the bank manager or bankruptcy.

This means prison or slavery. Sell yourself or your family members into slavery until that debt is paid back. But then in verse 42, something that has never happened in their world or ours.

[8 : 42] So he forgave the debts of both. Can you imagine if the ANZ rang you up and said, oh, hello, we forgot to give you a present for Christmas last year.

So, you know, that credit card and that crushing mortgage. Why don't we just forget about it? Has anyone had that fantasy before? Well, it's quite something. But this is a story with teeth.

Because this is a story about Simon. And you can see that at verse 42. End of verse 42. Which of them will love him more? Simon sees it's about him.

And so he grudgingly answers, I suppose, the one who had the bigger debt forgiven. You have judged correctly, said Jesus. You see, Jesus contrasts extreme woman with moderate Simon to expose what Simon's religious heart is really like.

He's trying to teach him the love principle. The person with the bigger debt cancelled loves more. More debt cancelled, more love. The sinful woman, she is not mad.

[9 : 50] She is madly in love because of what Jesus has done in her life. How much would you love me if I paid off your mortgage?

Would you hug me? Would there be tears of joy? Let me illustrate this more accurately as a rescue. A few years ago, in 2014, there was an American journalist called James Foley.

And James was kidnapped by ISIS. And they later killed him. I learned that James had actually been held prisoner for two years, since 2012.

And when I hear about stories like that, I think of his mum. Because I've got a mum who has three sons. And I know how my mum is with her sons. My wife, Rachel, she also has a son.

And so there's poor Mrs. Foley, James' mum. Two years, he's captured. She doesn't know where he is. And then, of course, they did that terrible thing to him. But imagine if the US Special Forces somehow broke in and rescued James and gave him back to his mum.

[11 : 01] How much love would she have for those soldiers? Tears and hugs, I'm sure. It would look like madness if you didn't know the story. The same thing is going on at Simon's dinner party.

Here is a woman, an extremist, if ever there was one. She kisses Jesus' dirty feet. They're unwashed. She washes them with her tears and her hair. The scene is wildly over the top.

Because she loves Jesus with all her heart and all her soul and all her mind and all her strength. But all Simon sees is a mad woman.

For us here today, do you think the woman is wild and extreme and over the top? If you don't understand her behaviour, do you really understand who Jesus is and what he has come to do?

Simon is bewildered by this lady. He's angered by the scene because he has no idea that her many sins have been forgiven. And so Jesus walks him through the love principle.

[12 : 09] Verse 44. Jesus turned toward the woman and then said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet.

Common courtesy. But she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss. That's not over the top. That's just as polite as a handshake.

But this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head. Again, basic hospitality for the guest of honour.

But she has poured perfume on my feet. In Jesus' story, he allows Simon the smaller debt. He offers his debts forgiven, just like the woman.

But he doesn't love Jesus at all. You see, Simon has a transactional relationship with God. God does his job, whatever that is.

[13 : 25] And we do ours. Try to be good, moderate, religious people. Simon looks at this woman. He doesn't understand her because he has no idea that he is also a debtor too.

And here is the sting in the story. Both have a debt and both can't pay. In the story, Simon has the smaller debt by a factor of 50.

But the sting is, both have a debt that both can't pay. You see, religion has done all it can for Simon. It has created a distance between himself and that woman.

It's made him look better to the world than the woman. But it did not help him to recognize who God is, even when he turned up for dinner. If being better than other people makes Simon think he's okay with God, he is in big trouble.

Because Jesus wants to say that both cannot or neither can pay their debts back. See, people, we think we're good compared to other people based on a comparison.

[14 : 32] But imagine if I said, I'm a better husband than my friend Ben. Because my friend Ben, he's always unfaithful to his wife. Whereas I'm only sometimes unfaithful to mine.

And when I'm unfaithful, what if I said to Rachel, that's okay, darling, because here is some flowers. Is it all better now? People do that all the time with God. I am a better Christian than that person, Lord.

Look, I'm here every week. I was unfaithful to you, Lord. Sorry, here is my good religious record. Big or small, we all have a debt that needs to be forgiven.

But no amount of religious performance can pay it back. That is the sting for Simon. And Jesus doesn't want extreme emotion like the woman, but just a recognition of how much we need his rescue.

And so he tells this story to Simon to shock him out of his complacency, to teach him what God is really like. You see, in our city, the nicest thing you can say about a religious person is that they are a moderate, that they have their religion under control.

[15 : 40] But Jesus won't be under control. He won't fit in our pockets. He says we all have a debt that we are unable to pay. This is a story about Simon and for people who are confused about Jesus, who think moderate religion is enough for God.

But I want to finish by looking at the woman and for people who identify with her. Verse 48, Jesus said to the woman, Your sins are forgiven. It's striking, isn't it?

He forgives the extremist and rebukes the moderate. Because Jesus is nothing like religious people. He's not about looking down on this woman. He's about forgiving her.

It required great courage for her to enter the Pharisee's house. It will require great courage for you to ask Jesus for forgiveness too. But you can be certain what the answer will be.

In verse 50, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Whether you owe 50 or 500, no matter what you have done in your life, the size of your sin isn't the problem.

[16 : 49] It's not an issue for Jesus. His death pays it all. No one can say, I'm too bad for him. And like the sinful woman, that should lead to, maybe extremism is the wrong word, but a wholehearted love and devotion instead.

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love has shown. We've been applying this passage all the way through. We've been changing our thoughts all the way through.

But I just want to finish with a couple of reflections. Lately here at this church, I've been feeling a bit awkward. Because all of, well, certainly my sermons, all of my sermons talk about sin.

And I feel that that's a bit awkward. It's a bit intense. We should probably just move on from that. But this passage says that that is okay. Because unless you feel the crushing weight of a mortgage, unless you feel the dread of being on death row, you won't love the rescue.

Unless you feel weighed down by sin, how perilous it is to face God without forgiveness, you won't love Jesus and his rescue for you.

[18 : 03] I have young children, as lots of you do. Some of you have young grandchildren. And we're supposed to pray that prayer, you know, that they would marry godly Christians later in life. That's a really excellent prayer, by the way.

But I don't really pray that for my kids. And the reason why is this, is because I spend all my time praying that my children would love Jesus more than I do. And so I talk to my children about sin.

It's amazing what they can understand and comprehend. I talk to them about sin because I want to nurture their relationship with God. Because I want them to love Jesus more than I do.

And Jesus, he doesn't need our tears and our hair. That was the woman. That's how she showed her great love. How we show our love for Jesus will look different in lots of different ways.

But it will always come back to how big our sin is. How much we appreciate and love what Jesus has done for us.

[19 : 05] Talking about sin in a city full of moderates will make you look extreme. But that is okay. Because whoever has been forgiven much, loves much.

Why don't our family and friends love Jesus? Because they don't think they need his forgiveness. Like Simon, they think they can work it off with some good moral Western living.

But whoever has been forgiven little, loves little. January, that's a time for New Year's resolutions. I don't know how you feel about resolutions. But here is one for you.

Why don't you resolve this year to recognize how extreme your sin is? That will feel a bit crushing. Recognize how extreme your sin is.

Recognize how extreme it would be to meet God without Jesus. So that it would lead you to wholehearted love and devotion to him.

[20 : 02] If your love for Jesus grew just 5% in 2020, that would be an incredible year in your Christian life. Verse 47.

Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little, loves little. So let me pray. Father God, thank you that you tell us the truth, even though it feels crushing at times.

And Father, thank you for Jesus, that he would forgive wretches like us. And please, Father, would we reflect on our sin so that we would love Jesus all the more.

Please, would our children love Jesus more than we do? Please, would we never get over what he has done for us? And even if that makes us look like extremists, so be it.

Please, would we consider what Jesus thinks of us? We pray these things for his glory. Amen.