

LESSON FOUR - ACCEPTED



This week we'll be looking at some particularly difficult issues - including learning about psychotic illnesses and talking about suicide. But we are going to start by looking at Jesus and how He responded to an emotional woman who didn't fit in.

Read Luke 7:36-50

Questions: What does the woman in the story do? What do you think motivated her? Have you ever felt like this?

What did the religious leaders think of her actions? How did they react to her?

How does Jesus react?

Jesus sees her heart and doesn't let her down. Her actions don't make sense: she breaks religious rules and it seems like a very expensive waste of money. But Jesus does not criticise her. He firmly takes her side, even though it means that He is judged too. In Matthew and Mark, He speaks out - "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me." He joins the outcast and is criticised by the establishment.

The world is full of people who are longing to reach out to God but have no idea how to do it 'properly' or 'appropriately'. Perhaps they are overwhelmed by mental health problems, or disability, of any number of other issues.

What is our response?

Question: What do you think of when you hear the word schizophrenia? What about bipolar?

Schizophrenia and bipolar affective disorder can affect anyone, regardless of upbringing, social class or personal faith. 8% of people have some type of psychotic episode in their life. There are effective treatments in the form of medication and talking therapies and the local church has a huge role to play here.

What is psychosis? This broad term describes experiences that are outside the normal. This can include hearing or seeing things that others cannot (hallucinations/hearing voices), believing things that do not seem to be true (delusions) and having extremely elevated moods (mania). Schizophrenia is a specific form of psychosis where delusions and hallucinations are common. Bipolar affective disorder is another form where high moods can be accompanied by grandiose beliefs and periods of very low mood.

Psychological treatments can help with understanding, preventing relapses and the anxiety that often accompanies these illnesses. Social activity, including everyday activities and hobbies and fitness, bring a rounded recovery. Often treatment is necessary for many years and must also focus on rehabilitation and living a meaningful life, which is helped by having a faith.

What about faith? Some people who have a faith and suffering from these disorders, can often see this get out of control – spending hours and hours reading the Bible, praying, but not understanding anything and then believing they are evil. But this is the illness speaking.

There are some examples of psychosis in the Bible – Nebuchadnezzar’s ‘madness’ in Daniel 4 is probably the most accurate description. People sometimes seem to confuse psychosis with demon possession – but the psychotic illnesses we know today look nothing like the demon encounters in the Gospels and should not be mistaken as such.

What can the church do? Mental health issues often leave people needing support. There can be a tendency for people to self-isolate, so friendship is essential. Practical help with shopping and household tasks may also be needed. People admitted to hospital for mental health problems rarely receive cards, flowers or visitors: a hospital visit can make a huge difference to someone feeling isolated and afraid.

How should the church respond to suicide? What do you think?

This is an extremely difficult topic to talk about, but it is so important that church is a place we can speak about these things. Sometimes a crisis of faith can be a part of the individual’s personal collapse. People may feel in conflict with God, or ashamed, or beyond forgiveness. They may

experience pressure, or depression, or pain or disordered thoughts which obscure God and His love.

What can we do? Be a place where people can be real with each other and talk honestly. When someone talks about suicide, take it seriously. Grieve with, love and support those left behind.

Challenge In today's passage. We have read about a desperate woman reaching out to Jesus. The religious leaders and, in some versions, the disciples are very angry at her. Yet Jesus values her actions - He sees her motivation, and in fact points out that her shocking actions are more loving than his host's.

Have we as Christians, and as a church, ever done what the Pharisees did here – react to a heartfelt desire for connection to God with angry judgement?

Do we have rules that set out the correct and appropriate ways to reach out to Jesus?

Are there barriers in our church which make it harder to reach Jesus?

How do we respond when people break our cultural norms?

What would it look like to be a church that welcomed people like this weeping woman?

Meditation Take a few minutes of quiet to review what we've heard today and think about what to do with it, giving God the space to speak to us. Remember the story that we read together at the beginning of this session - the woman who wept as she washed Jesus' feet with her hair. Imagine what it would have been like to actually be there - in a house with Jesus

Let's think in turn about three characters: the weeping woman – how does she feel? The Pharisee – why does he respond as he does? Jesus – What does He do? What motivates Him?

Is there someone in your life who longs for Jesus but who struggles to fit in?

What can you do to encourage and accept them?

Closing prayer

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.