

INTRODUCTION

A man visited his barber every Saturday. One Saturday he announced he was going to travel to Rome and hoped to see the Pope. The barber, who tended to be rather sour and critical about everything, said, "Rome? That's the dirtiest city in the world! And don't fly TWA because the food is awful and the seats are crowded. You'll never get within a hundred miles of the Pope—you're just wasting your time and money." A few weeks later, the customer returned and told the barber he had been to Rome. He said, "I flew TWA, and the food was good and the seats were comfortable. You were wrong about that. I found Rome to be a beautiful, captivating city—you were wrong again. And I not only visited the Vatican but I was able to walk right up to the Pope. I knelt down and he placed his hand on my head and spoke a personal word to me." By this time, the cynical barber was dumbfounded. He said, "Well, what did the Pope say to you?" The man said, "The Pope said, 'My son, that is the worst haircut I've ever seen!'"

A lot of people are like that barber: They only find things to criticize. Today we are going to discuss a dinner party hosted by a man who has the same critical attitude. Only Dr. Luke records this beautiful story about an unnamed woman who wept at Jesus' feet and anointed His feet with expensive perfume. Before we read the text, let me clear up two points of confusion surrounding this incident. First, through the years, people have mistakenly identified this woman as Mary Magdalene. There *was* a Mary Magdalene who followed Jesus and had seven demons cast out of her but there is absolutely no evidence she is the woman in this story. Second, this incident should not be confused with the anointing Mary of Bethany (Martha and Lazarus' sister) administered to Jesus. A few days before Jesus was crucified, Mary anointed Jesus' feet and head with precious perfume—as a prelude to his burial, Jesus understood. This incident in Luke 7 takes place at a much earlier time and a different place.

As we read the account of this stunning love story, let's try to place ourselves at the edge of the crowd and allow the eyes of our imagination to see what happened:

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this he said to himself, "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." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her

tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” Then Jesus said to her, “your sins are forgiven.”

The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

What a scene! Let’s dig a little deeper into the meaning of his incident. First let’s answer the question:

I. GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER? (36-40)

To visualize the setting, you must understand the basics of Jewish hospitality. In Bible times, the custom of hospitality dictated a wealthy man was under social obligation to open his home to any notable strangers who visited the area. So the fact Jesus was invited to dinner does not mean Simon admired Jesus. And once Jesus was invited, it would have been an insult for Him to refuse this invitation. In addition, social customs also required the wealthy Pharisee to invite everyone in the village to attend as a bystander. This was their only entertainment. You could call it a Bible times talk show but I we know the host was named Simon, not Jerry Springer!

A certain protocol was followed when a guest arrived. If Martha Stewart were having a show about it she would tell you when a guest arrived, it was customary for the host to greet him at the door and to place a kiss on each cheek. Any rabbi or teacher was especially deserving this greeting of honor. Then a servant would bring water and remove guest’s sandals, wash his feet and dry them with a soft towel. Another servant would take a drop of perfumed oil and place it on the guest’s head. Then the guest would be led to the low table (called a triclinium for its three sides) and given the position of honor. While eating, the guests would recline on low couches, leaning on their left elbows and eating with their right hands (the clean hand). It should have been a time of great joy and laughter but this meal didn’t go as planned. Let’s notice the main characters. First, there was a:

1. A wicked, weeping woman

To everyone’s surprise and to the dismay of the host, this notorious woman appeared at Jesus’ feet. She was weeping and her tears were falling on His feet. The original language says she was “a sinner in the city.” That was a phrase carrying the same meaning to us as “a woman of the night” or “a street walker.” The language indicates she was a prostitute, a harlot. What do you think she looked like?

My wife Cindy has a wonderful story-telling ability. She can read between the lines and imagine details about a Bible story most of us miss. This is how Cindy describes the scene:

She is a small and attractive young woman. She was blessed with long thick black hair and eyes as large as dark moons. She moved softly and gracefully, her shape was appealing to every eye and the envy of many. But for all these good features, she was a

woman without peace. Her mind was a constant battlefield of right and wrong. Perhaps she waited in the alley behind Simon’s house for a long time wondering if she should expose herself to the ridicule she knew would come. She hates herself. She hates what she has become. She hates what she does to earn money to eat and she wonders if this Jesus can really change her life. It is not until her eyes are swollen with tears, her throat is sore from the muffled sobs, and her heart is completely broken that she decides to go in the house. Any life would be better than the one she has now. Beauty, possessions, popularity, even eating cannot take the place of peace.

I’m sure Simon and the other “respectable” people were whispering to each other, “what is SHE doing here?” That’s a good question. What WAS she doing there? I think it’s clear from the result of her actions she was there looking for something. She had heard about Jesus and had heard He was offering something none of her customers ever offered: He was offering *forgiveness*. As she got close to Jesus, the heart of this hardened woman literally broke open. She wept because she realized her hideous sinful condition. Respectable women never let down their hair in public. But she is at a point where she no longer cares what anyone thinks about her; she sees she can offer a very personal part of her to help Jesus. So she lets down her hair to wipe His feet.

Those who have studied ancient customs tell us prostitutes of that day often wore a vial of perfume hanging by a cord around their necks. In a culture where bathing was infrequent, a pleasant fragrance would have been their stock in trade. A drop or two would be used to entice prospective customers. But the language used in this passage indicated she poured out all her perfume. Do you see the significance of what she did? She broke the vial to anoint Jesus with the perfume. She broke the tools of her trade. It was her way of saying “I won’t need this anymore. I’m making a clean break with my past.”

Then she began to kiss Jesus’ feet. This was not uncommon in ancient times because it was one of the ways a beaten enemy surrendered to the one who had won the battle. It was not only a sign of affection from this woman. It was her way of saying, “I surrender to you Jesus. You have won. I give up. Your grace has conquered my stubborn spirit.” What a beautiful picture of adoration and worship!

2. A sour self-righteous skeptic

Let’s take just a moment and examine the host. We are told Simon is a Pharisee. He was a meticulous observer of the religious laws of the Old Testament. He fasted, he tithed and he gave alms to the poor. He was a respectable citizen of the community. He served on all the right boards and committees. He never missed a Sabbath service or feast day. He knew his Bible backward and forward. He was a great man, a legend in his own mind!

Let’s play Simon Says for a moment. What did Simon say? He didn’t say it out loud but he spoke to himself with a smug sense of satisfaction. “I knew it. This Jesus cannot be a prophet. A real prophet would know this woman was a prostitute and he would certainly forbid her to touch him. Ha! Jesus is finished now. Wait until word gets around he let his immoral woman fawn over him like that!” His thoughts only confirm what he had suspected.

You see, Simon had a high opinion of himself. He thought he was vastly superior to that wicked woman and he even felt now he was above Jesus. He joined the other self-righteous people cutting their eyes from the scene to each other. Each glance said, “Can you believe what SHE is doing? Can you believe HE is letting her?”

Are there any attitudes like that left around these days? Let’s imagine a Sunday School party of one of our ladies’ classes. Everyone is dressed to kill in her designer clothes, tasteful, refined, elegant. These fine ladies are standing around sipping their tea talking about the Lord’s work. Suddenly a woman walks in wearing a tight, short, leather miniskirt and a low-cut blouse, platform shoes and fish-net stockings—I mean, Erin Brockovich times three. Her hair is a bright red that can only come from a bottle and her eye makeup is dark and thick. Let’s stand back and watch the glances and listen to the remarks. What would happen?

Or here’s a discipleship group of successful guys who golf together. They are wearing their designer label shirts and slacks, and are all successful in their businesses. Their wives and children could all appear in a Neiman-Marcus catalogue. A homeless guy stumbles into their little religious group and tries to ask for help. Let’s watch their reaction as well. Simon’s ancestors are alive and well and living among us. Who do you more closely identify with, the harlot at the feet of Jesus or the smug, religious Pharisee? I’m not talking about lifestyle; I’m talking about attitude. Of course, God doesn’t want us to lead sexually immoral lives. His plan for our lives is that we would hunger for and pursue holiness. But when it comes to our attitudes toward people who aren’t like us, do we find a little of that Pharisee condescension rising up in us? We must be careful that while we denounce sin, we must not exclude the sinner from the grace of God. God hasn’t called us to judge or condemn sinners but to point them to Jesus. If we aren’t careful, we will spend all our time criticizing people who aren’t like us.

I read a true story about a woman who enjoyed making wax figurines. She wanted to improve her skill so she attended a night class taught by a local artist. This teacher however, took an immediate dislike to her for no apparent reason. This dislike soon took on the form of harsh criticism of her work, no matter how good it was. Each week she tried harder than the previous week to make a wax figure better than before. But to no avail, the teacher criticized more than ever.

On her very last week she approached the teacher and placed her final project, an apple, on the teacher’s desk. The teacher looked at it with disdain and immediately set about criticizing her work. It was not red enough, not round enough, not shiny enough, not big enough. When the teacher finally finished, the lady silently took the apple and ate it.

3. The loveable, liberating Lord

There is another character at the dinner party: His name is Jesus. It’s interesting He allows the fallen woman to approach Him and to wash His feet with her tears. He doesn’t turn and say, “No, you don’t have to do that. I know who you are and what you’ve done and it’s okay, you can stop now.” Without a word spoken, He accepts her acts of love. Why? Just as He was going to read Simon’s thoughts in a moment, He could read the woman’s mind. Behind the sobs and tears, He

heard a heart breaking over sin, seeking forgiveness and reaching out to love and worship. Remember a few weeks ago I preached on “God is touched by our tears?” Here, Jesus is *literally* touched by the tears of a woman whose eyes became a fountain.

Have you ever used the word “loveable” in relation to Jesus? We often use the word “*loving*.” Sure, Jesus loves us. He is loving. But He is also one who is loveable. That is, He is worthy to be loved and He accepts our love. We all need to be loved but we also need someone to love. I’m happy to report today that Jesus will let you love Him.

One more thing about Jesus before we move on. He was able to read Simon’s thoughts. Simon didn’t speak his critical, skeptical words aloud. If you still think Jesus is impressed by all your religious words and clichés, remember, He is reading our minds at this moment, too! That leads Jesus to deliver:

II. THE AFTER-DINNER SPEECH (41-47)

Like every good banquet, there was an after-dinner speech and Jesus gives it. Notice

1. The short story of two debtors

This is one of Jesus’ shortest parables. One man owed 500 denarii and another owed 50. A denarius was roughly the amount of money a man made working an entire day. What is the total amount you would make in almost two years? That’s how much the first man owed. The second man owed about what one made in two months. The banker forgave both debts. Who is going to be more appreciative? That’s a no-brainer and even Simon gets the right answer. Beware the Lord’s parables. They are God’s stethoscope. The Good Physician is checking the condition of the heart, listening for faith and unbelief.

2. The personal application about love

At this point, Jesus delivers his *coup de gras*. He tells Simon to look at the wicked woman. Why? Good Pharisees would not even *look* at a fallen woman like that. Jesus takes a moment to compare Simon and this woman. At this point, we learn Simon intentionally insulted Jesus by withholding the acts of common courtesy at his arrival. Simon had not kissed Jesus, nor had his feet washed, nor anointed His hair with a drop of oil. This insult would be the same as if I publicly refused to shake the hand of someone who offers it to me.

Jesus points out this woman of the street, not a righteous Pharisee, had a greater sense of right and wrong. She stepped in to do what Simon had not done. Her tears, her hair, and her perfume were substituted for what Simon intentionally withheld. Then in verse 47, Jesus sums it up by saying, “Her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” What a bombshell. Everyone knows Jesus is talking about Simon and He was talking about us, as well. Here’s the point: **The depth and expression of your love for Jesus is connected to how desperately you know you need forgiveness.**

Simon thought forgiveness was something he deserved because he was such a good guy. And besides, he didn't really have much that needed to be forgiven anyway. That attitude still exists today.

On the other hand, many of us feel exactly like the prostitute. We realize our sin is a stinking, putrefying, rotting mess and we desperately need Jesus to clean up our lives, to forgive our sin. And when we realize He has, we want to just fall at His feet and kiss them over and over again. Would you kiss the feet of Jesus if you had the chance? His Body is here, the church, and you and I have the chance to humble ourselves and kiss the feet of Jesus every time we serve this body in humility. Jesus is still loveable and He accepts every act of love offered to Him.

Perhaps you've heard me previously mention the great British pastor, Charles Spurgeon. He is one of my great pastoral heroes because he was a tremendous Bible expositor. I don't quote him much because his sermons were preached at a time when oratory was an art form and it's a little flowery for today's audiences. However, I want to make an exception today. I want to read you what he had to say about this woman. Spurgeon preached without notes, so these words were recorded just as he spoke them:

“The woman, almost unperceived, came close to him, and, as she looked and saw that the Pharisee had refused him the ordinary courtesy of washing his feet, and that they were all stained and travel-worn with his long journeys of love, she began to weep, and the tears fell in such plenteous showers that they even washed his feet. Here was holy water of a true sort. The crystal of penitence falling in drops, each one as precious as a diamond. Never were feet bedewed with a more precious water than those penitent eyes showered forth. Then, unbinding those luxurious tresses, which had been for her the devil's nets in which to entangle souls, she wiped the sacred feet therewith. Surely she thought that her chief adornment, the crown and glory of her womanhood, was all too worthless a thing to do service to the lowest and meanest part of the Son of God. Her flowing hair, which once was her vanity now was humbled and yet exalted to the lowest office. Then she began to kiss those feet, to humbly pay reverence to those blessed limbs. She spake not a word, but how eloquent were her actions! Better even than psalms and hymns were these acts of devotion. Then she thought of her alabaster cruse containing perfumed oil with which, like most Eastern women, she was wont to anoint herself for the pleasure of the smell and for the increase of her beauty, and now, opening it, she pours out the costliest thing she has upon his blessed feet. Not a word, I say, came from her; and, brethren, we would prefer a single speechless lover of Jesus, who acted as she did, to ten thousand noisy talkers who have no gifts, no heart, no tears.”

That's not all though, there's more.

III. WHAT'S FOR DESSERT? (48-50)

Have you ever eaten a meal at a fine restaurant and had the server bring the dessert tray around? It is full of scrumptious, sweet, delicacies. That's really what Jesus does in this encounter. As you can imagine, the air is thick with the tension of the evening. Jesus looks directly at the woman for the first time and speaks to her as if there is no one else in the room. His gaze

captures her heart and she hears only His voice. He offers her a three-course dessert. And by the way, He offers the same to you today. How sweet it is! You can:

1. BE FORGIVEN—RELEASED from guilt

Jesus said in verse 48, “your sins are forgiven.” The root word for “forgive” means “to release.” A tremendous weight of guilt and shame had been weighing heavily on this woman. In that one statement, she must have felt the weight of the world lift off her shoulders. Like a bird released from its cage, she was liberated by Jesus’ love and forgiveness!

He is offering you forgiveness today. Will you accept His offer? In Psalm 53:1, we read these powerful words, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” In the original Hebrew it simply says, “The fool says, ‘No God.’” It’s like someone offering you a serving of dessert and you say, “No dessert.” You aren’t saying the dessert doesn’t exist, you are simply stating you do not choose to eat it.

That’s what Psalm 53:1 really says. A fool is a person, who upon being offered God’s love and forgiveness says, “No, God.” It doesn’t mean God doesn’t exist. It means that person chooses, “No God for me.” Jesus is offering you full pardon and forgiveness: Will you accept it?

2. BE SAVED—by FAITH accept His forgiveness

In verse 50 Jesus says to the woman, “your faith has saved you.” Did you notice Jesus puts salvation in the past tense? He didn’t say, “your faith will save you” or “your faith may save you,” He said, “your faith HAS saved you.”

We talked about faith at length earlier in this chapter when Jesus discovered the amazing faith of the centurion. Remember, God tosses us grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness. Faith is our response as we reach out and “catch” what God sends our way. What a word of assurance! The next day, if you had asked the former prostitute whether or not she was saved, what do you think her answer would be? “I hope so?” “Maybe?” No, she would say, “I know I’m saved because Jesus himself told me my faith has saved me!”

Let me ask you a question: If Jesus Christ looked you in the eyes and told you the same thing He told that woman, “Your faith has saved you,” would you *ever* doubt your salvation again? You say, “Certainly not! Oh, how I wish Jesus would say that to me!” My friend He *has* said it. In John 3:36 we read, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.” No question about it—God didn’t stutter. If you are trusting Jesus to save you, you have (right now) eternal life!

3. GO IN PEACE—walk through life with an inner tranquility

I love the last three words Jesus speaks to the changed woman. “Go in peace.” She approached Jesus as a hurting, horrible sinner. Her life was one of shame and turmoil. Peace was a stranger to her. She left Jesus a changed woman, forgiven, saved and able to experience peace. Does anyone here think she went straight back into her life of sin? Not hardly! She was a new person.

That’s what happens when a person meets Jesus. He changes us from the inside out. “If any person is in Christ they are a new creation. Old things are passed away, behold all things have become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

She was a changed woman! She no longer lived the life of sin she practiced before. Augustine, the great Christian thinker, consorted with a prostitute before he was saved. After his salvation experience, the woman saw him on the street and called to him, “Augustine, Augustine, it is I!” Turning to walk away Augustine said, “Yes, but it is no longer *I!*” He had been changed and so had the woman in Luke.

CONCLUSION

Where do you fit into this story? Have you been forgiven but you really haven’t shown your love and worship to Jesus for His forgiveness? What a beautiful picture of worship this woman gives us. We can learn three tremendous things about worship by just watching her. Worship always happens at the feet of Jesus. Worship is a preoccupation with Jesus, not some form or ritual. Worship is more concerned about *giving* something than *getting* something. Do you need to fall at the feet of Jesus today and kiss them and say, “Thank you Jesus for forgiving my horrible sins?”

Some folks may relate to old Simon. We are so religious and strict, if someone comes into our service that looks and acts different than our little “holy model” we get all hot and bothered like Simon. Oh, friends, when are we going to learn the people out there who haven’t yet come to Jesus for forgiveness are different from us? They are alcoholics, child abusers, drug addicts, criminals, prostitutes, and pornographers. Are we going to turn our noses up at them when they come seeking what this woman came seeking? All of us like that need to get on our face at the feet of Jesus and start kissing His feet.

Or maybe you feel like the woman *before* she approached Jesus. You fear you aren’t good enough to approach Him—let me put your mind at ease—you *aren’t* good enough! None of us are. But when Jesus looks at you, He sees you not for what you have become, but for what you *can* become through His grace and forgiveness. When Jesus looked at that woman, He didn’t see a prostitute. He saw what she could become when she was forgiven. He saw the beauty beneath the surface of the harlot.

Here’s a true story from Bristol, Connecticut. A couple had a yard sale and decided to sell a mirror they’d received as a wedding gift. It was an expensive mirror but they were selling it because it had a gaudy, aqua-colored frame that didn’t match anything else in their house. A man bought the mirror for \$1. He was excited. He said, “This is a *great* deal—it still has the plastic on the frame!” He peeled off the aqua-covered plastic to reveal a beautiful gold finished frame!

That’s what Jesus did with that woman and that’s what He does for us. He knows below the gaudy, ugly surface there is something beautiful waiting to be revealed. His forgiveness liberates us and strips away the ugly covering. Will you fall at His feet today and allow Him to change you forever?

OUTLINE

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2. A sour, self-righteous skeptic
3. The loveable, liberating Lord

II. THE AFTER-DINNER SPEECH (41-47)

1. The short story of two debtors
2. The personal application about love

The depth and expression of your love for Jesus is connected to how desperately you know you need forgiveness

III. WHAT’S FOR DESSERT? (48-50)

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2. Be saved—by FAITH accept His forgiveness
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes