

## THE STORY OF JESUS, SIMON THE PHARISEE AND THE IMMORAL WOMAN: THE PARABLE OF TWO DEBTORS

Luke 7:36-50

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This story that we will be exploring both this Sunday and next is centered on the most profound, the most far-reaching, the most liberating, and the most joy-producing truth of our salvation in Christ Jesus. It is locked in a short two-verse parable that Jesus uttered, positioned at the pivotal center of a larger story (fifteen verses in length in our modern Bibles). It is a story that celebrates the greatest truth that lies at the heart of our salvation—***the truth that we are eternally forgiven of all our sins, iniquities, transgressions, failures, and shortcomings because they have been covered in the perfect, sin-atonement, transgression-removing, debt-releasing, redemption-securing work of Jesus Christ our Savior!***

This gift of sins forgiven, blotted out, and remembered no more is established as the firm and unshakable foundation of the everlasting covenant ratified by the bloody death and triumphant resurrection of our covenant mediator, Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection have guaranteed our full and permanent redemption from all sin and have secured everlasting reconciliation with our great Triune Creator-Redeemer God to whom we render all our worship and with whom we will celebrate our salvation throughout the endless ages of eternity in the new heavens and new earth and within our new dwellings in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22. I hope that my attempt to squeeze all these blessed realities into a few run-on sentences turns you on, because if it doesn't I don't know where your off/on switch is!

We see these realities given expression in the Jeremiah and Ezekiel versions of the promises of the New Covenant. Here's the composite list from these two prophets. The Lord God declares:

- I will put My law in your minds and write it on your hearts.
- I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you.
- I will remove the heart of stone (that is dead), and give you a heart of flesh (that is living).
- I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will safeguard my judgments and do them.
- I will be your God, and you shall be My people.
- From the least to the greatest in this new covenant community, you shall all know Me!
- And here's the **foundation** of all these things: "*For I will **forgive** your iniquity, and your sin I will **remember no more.***"

This same foundational reality undergirding this new covenant was given a pictorial preview in the every fifty-year celebration of the Year of Jubilee under the old covenant. The Year of Jubilee was the year of the forgiveness and cancelation of all debts; it was the year of the return to your originally allocated land and liberty under Joshua; it was the year that your inheritance was restored with all its promise and abundance. Put in modern terms that we hear bantered about in our news media today, it was the year of the great reset; it was a fresh start and a new beginning. The old covenant Year of Jubilee was the foreshadowing of the greater new covenant eternal Jubilee of redemption from sin and the restoration of our inheritance in Christ

Jesus, an inheritance that Peter describes as incorruptible, undefiled, and that will never mysteriously disappear because it is held in reserve for you in the bank of heaven.

But there is a little catch, a tiny prerequisite, to the celebration of these eternal realities embedded in the story that we are going to look at in two parts beginning this morning. This story is only found in Luke's Gospel, and it occurs sometime in the early months of Jesus' public ministry. His public ministry had very quickly gathered momentum as it attracted the attention of the people of Israel and even foreigners who lived in the region around the Sea of Galilee called Galilee of the Gentiles. But it was also attracting the attention of the religious leaders scattered throughout Galilee and further south into Judea and even reaching into the religious capitol of Jerusalem itself.

The community of religious leaders (and in particular the scribes and Pharisees), was troubled by what was happening because a renegade teacher and healer, Jesus of Nazareth, was seizing the attention and imagination of the masses in Israel. He was viewed by these religious authorities as dangerous because He had not been formally schooled or trained under any of the leading rabbis in Israel, and his message too closely resembled that of John the Baptist who had been another troubler of Israel preaching repentance out in the wilderness areas around the Jordan River. ***In short, Jesus was a threat and He did not fit the mold of the religious authorities of first century Judaism!***

I want to begin by reading the entire text of the story and making a few cursory comments as we move through it. The story as you can see from your handout unfolds in seven scenes that fall into the pattern of an inverted parallelism arranged around the short parable located exactly in the middle of the story. Let's begin with the introduction in Scene 1.

#### **A Scene 1: Introduction**

<sup>36</sup> Now one of the Pharisees requested Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner.

In these opening two verses, we are introduced to the three main characters in the story— (1) a Pharisee whom we learn later in vs. 40 is named Simon; (2) Jesus, whom Simon has invited to dinner in his home; and (3) a woman who is a "sinner" in the city. This one-word description identifying her as a sinner was Luke's shorthand way of saying she was a prostitute in the city. Everyone knew who she was, including Simon. In contrast to Jesus, however, she had **not** been invited to this special dinner in Simon's house, but Luke introduces her here because she will become one of its three main characters, and in many ways the pivotal character as the story unfolds, even though she never utters a word!

We learn as the story draws to a close that Simon had also invited some of his religious associates among the scribes and Pharisees to attend this dinner as well. The one notable absence from Simon's guest list was Jesus' disciples. Jesus had been invited to dinner, but they had not!

Apparently, Simon and some of his fellow scribes and Pharisees have just come from one of the occasions of Jesus' public ministry. His preaching and His miracles were now attracting large crowds, but his exploding popularity with the people was troubling to the religious leaders because Jesus didn't fit their mold. He had not been formally schooled or trained under any of the leading rabbis in Israel, and the disciples he had gathered around him were a bunch of religious misfits from tough, raw-bone fishermen to a criminal tax

collector, and his message closely resembled that of John the Baptist who had turned out to be the wild, renegade son of a former priest, Zechariah, whose son had now become a troubler of Israel preaching repentance out in the wilderness areas around the Jordan river.

This whole scene was just a little too much for Simon the Pharisee, and he had invited some of his fellow religious leaders to this banquet with Jesus, who was quickly developing the reputation among the masses as more than a rabbi, but a new prophet in Israel. So this would be their private investigatory time to go head-to-head, one-on-one, with this new would-be prophet and healer in Israel. But Simon's plan doesn't work out the way he intended as Scene 2 abruptly informs us.

### **B Scene 2: Outpouring of the Woman's Love (Action)**

And when she (this notorious sinner in the city) learned that He (Jesus) was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house,

- A she brought an alabaster vial of **perfume**,
- B <sup>38</sup> and standing behind *Him* at His **feet**, weeping,
- C she began to **wet His feet** with her tears,
- C' and **wiping them** with the hair of her head,
- B' and kissing His **feet**
- A' and anointing them with the **perfume**.

The careful and orderly report of the woman's action in this inverted sequence suggests that even though her actions were spontaneous, they were very deliberate (and maintained a modicum of respect for cultural norms as we will see in a few moments). Unexpectedly, however, she bursts into the dining room, unannounced and uninvited. Her rude intrusion is shocking to the high-ranking men who had been invited to this special occasion.

The woman is weeping and carrying an alabaster bottle of perfume. She falls down at Jesus' feet (which are extended out behind him as he reclines at the table), her tears begin to wet his feet, she wipes them dry with the hair of her head, and then she kisses his feet as she anoints them with the perfume from her alabaster vial.

Scene 3 then shifts to Simon as he privately sits in judgment of what he is beholding...

### **C Scene 3: Dialogue: Simon Judges Wrongly**

<sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher."

And Jesus, at the center of the story, relates the brief parable of two debtors...

### **D Scene 4: Parable of the Two Debtors**

- A <sup>41</sup> "A moneylender
- B had two debtors:
- C one owed five hundred denarii,
- C' and the other fifty.
- B' <sup>42</sup> "When they were unable to repay,
- A he graciously forgave them both.

To this brief comparison of two debtors, Jesus now appends his question for Simon,

**C' Scene 5: Dialogue: Simon Judges Rightly**

So which of them will love him more?"

<sup>43</sup> Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more."

And He said to him, "You have judged correctly."

Then Jesus turns toward the woman in Scene 6...

**B' Scene 6: Outpouring of the Woman's Love (Review)**

<sup>44</sup> Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> "You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. <sup>46</sup> "You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. <sup>47</sup> "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for (the clear evidence that she has been forgiven much is that) she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

**A' Scene 7: Conclusion**

<sup>48</sup> Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." <sup>49</sup> Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

As we have already suggested, Simon and his religious colleagues from the ranks of the scribes and Pharisees have just come from one of the occasions of Jesus' public ministry, and Simon has quickly arranged a special dinner with Jesus as the invited guest. Since all the meals that Pharisees ate required ritual purity, it meant that this occasion had to meet the standard of ***separation from impure foods and impure people***. But they have invited Jesus who is not only a **non-Pharisee**, but he had also been recently confronted by certain scribes and Pharisees for His healing of a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath. So Jesus has already been convicted of a failure to measure up to the Pharisees' standard of ceremonial cleanliness by healing people on the Sabbath (Lk 6:6-11).

Now He is in the company of the most elite and "ceremonially-pure" guests he could ever join for dinner. The rigid purity rules that the Pharisees had created required their separation from the common people who lived all around them. The word "pharisee" in fact was derived from the Hebrew root that means "to separate," meaning the Pharisees were the proud, self-acclaimed "separated ones." Their banquets were all private affairs, reserved for "ceremonially-pure" elites only; but ironically, Jesus who would never pass the Pharisees' rigid ceremonial purity test, is nonetheless invited to dinner with these same Pharisees.

What this means is that this invitation to dinner was not a "let's get better acquainted" meal with a newly emerging teacher of the law, but was instead a kind of clandestine "grand jury" gathering of information that will help them discredit Jesus and even convict Him of crimes against the traditions of the elders. Their intention was to begin to reverse the growing support He was getting from the masses that included the deplorables of first century Judaism, especially tax collectors and prostitutes. So their meal invitation was part of the necessary "dirty work" the Pharisees had to do as part of their "discovery" of evidence to discredit Jesus and, hopefully, perhaps even later convict Him of crimes that carried a death sentence!

Later in the gospel records, the Pharisees will become so desperate to discredit Jesus that they will accuse Him of performing His miracles, including casting out demons, by the dark power of the devil himself. But Jesus challenges such an absurdity by the simple logic that a house divided against itself cannot stand. If He were casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons, He would nonsensically be divided against Himself! Their outlandish charge led Jesus to warn His hardened opponents that they were in serious danger of crossing a line and blaspheming the Holy Spirit, whose power alone was being demonstrated in Jesus' miracles.

So (returning to our text) the dinner to which Jesus had been invited was not a typical Pharisaical occasion where the invited ones were privileged to participate in learned religious discussions of the Torah and the oral traditions of the elders of Israel. In this instance, Simon and his guests were on a search and destroy mission, prepared for a heated adversarial battle with this new rabbi who was creating a troubling popular uprising. ***Among other things, the hidden agenda of Simon and his guests at this dinner was to lay a snare for this unconventional rabbi-teacher that could be used to expose and oppose the lie building among the masses that Jesus was a new prophet in Israel*** (cf. Lk 7:16, 26). The mindset of the Pharisees had already excluded such an absurd notion that Jesus was a prophet. They believed instead that He, through His unsanctioned, unholy, fake ministry, would accumulate such egregious violations of the law and Jewish traditions that He would ultimately condemn Himself to death.

It is already clear from events earlier in Luke, that Israel was being polarized into two groups: on the one hand there was "the people and the tax collectors" and on the other, "the Pharisees and the lawyers (scribes)." The ministry of John the Baptist had become the early litmus test that distinguished between these two groups—the uninformed masses who accepted the ministry of John and later Jesus and the smaller informed elite who rejected the ministries of John and Jesus as dangerous assaults on the well-established truths of contemporary Judaism. ***The first marker that separated these two groups was John's baptism that signified a repentance for the remission of sins vs. the Pharisees who rejected John's baptism of repentance because they had no sins to confess.*** What is clear as Jesus accepts the invitation to dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee is that enough has already happened to make the tension at this dinner so thick that you could cut it with a knife. The atmosphere for this dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house is already charged and deeply divided around Jesus of Nazareth, just as it had been around John the Baptist.

But before we come to the interrupting event that sends the story in a completely different direction, we need to fill in some background. The text of vs. 36 says that Jesus entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. In the synoptic gospels, "reclining" for a meal indoors is typical language describing the special occasion of a prepared dinner event. With the mention of other guests in vs. 49, it would thus be a relatively formal occasion where the traditional roles that would make up guest and host etiquette would be expected.

The dining room itself usually contained a long, low table in the center of the room, with low couches on either side, on which the guests, seated in order of rank or honor, would recline. They would lean on their left elbow, with their feet stretching out turned away from the table. As the guests would enter, they would take off their sandals and leave them at the door. Servants would be stationed behind the couches, with a wide, shallow basin placed on the ground. They would pour water over the feet of the guests to wash off the dust of the streets. If this courtesy

were omitted, it would imply that the visitor was of very inferior rank and was not being fully accepted into the host's home. *It would indicate that He had only been granted a probationary entrance that awaited final approval of the host.*

We should also not that entertainment in the ancient Middle East was a very public affair. The gate to the courtyard and the door stood open, and behind the servants the villagers could gather to observe the event at a distance, which explains how the woman could have access to the house and could crash the party as easily as she did.

So Jesus was reclining with his legs stretched out behind him. Feet were always kept at a distance from the table because of the offensive, unclean regard for feet in oriental society. The masses observing at a distance are all figuratively at the feet of the elite at this table, but a certain woman has rudely invaded the dining room and she quickly positions herself literally at the feet of the one man before whom she now rejoices to humble herself because of the hope of salvation His words had awakened in her heart.

So the unfolding picture looks something like this. Jesus is being recognized as a rabbi in Galilee, and much discussion has been stirred by the message He is preaching. He is invited to a banquet by Simon, an apparent leader among the Pharisee with a recognized authority and rank among his peers. He has invited some of his fellow scribes and Pharisees to dinner along with a special invitation to Jesus to join them. So Jesus will now meet with the shapers of Israel's religion! ***The ostensible purpose is to discuss Jesus' teaching, but the Pharisees have the deeper agenda of wanting to find grounds for discrediting Jesus as a prophet or the Messiah, and even to challenge whether he meets the qualifications to be a simple rabbi.*** As was the tradition, the doors to the house were open and the uninvited were free to approach the dining room up to a marked off distance where they might see and overhear at a distance the exchanges and discussions that went on at the Pharisee's table.

*In vs. 40, Simon addresses Jesus as Teacher, one of Luke's words for a rabbi.* There was an established etiquette that clearly defined how a host should treat a visiting teacher. Yet when Simon invited Jesus to his house, he violated every rule of hospitality that would be given to such an honored guest.

- First, an invited guest is received with a kiss of greeting. In the case of a rabbi, all the male members of the family wait at the entrance to the house and kiss his hands as he enters. If those receiving him are of equal rank, they kiss him on the cheek.
- Once in the house, the first act is the washing of the guest's feet.
- And then in the case of a very special guest, his head was anointed with oil. Interestingly, **none** of these courtesies were shown to Jesus.

## **B Scene 2: The Woman's Actions in the Pharisee's House**

**This unnamed and uninvited woman suddenly enters the dining room.** It seems she has just heard Jesus teach on a theme prominent in his teaching—the forgiveness of sins, and for the first time in her life the despair, degradation, and downward spiral of her life as a prostitute was suddenly given a glimmer of hope that she thought had been lost forever. She couldn't imagine that forgiveness was even possible for her. Jesus' words had triggered a new hope of forgiveness that she imagined was dead and beyond possibility. In short, the gospel coming from Jesus' lips had overwhelmed her, and it has stirred in her an irrepressible pursuit of more from this Rabbi of Nazareth. Could she, a woman mired in the

depths of a deep sin that had become her only means of survival, ever be delivered from bondage to the curse of only being used as the object of men's abusive lust? Jesus' message of love and forgiveness had awakened hope in her heart and filled her eyes with tears of joy. The assurance of heaven's complete forgiveness of her sin would mean a true fresh start, a new beginning, and a liberty from her sin! She must hear more!

The woman learned that Jesus had entered the house of Simon the Pharisee, and she had gathered with others who were eager to see and hear what was going to happen with Jesus sitting at the table of this very well-known Pharisee. However, as she beholds the way that Jesus is being treated by the proud Pharisee, she cannot contain herself and she bolts through the gate that was limiting access to the table where Jesus and the others are reclining, she bursts into the dining room where all these religious leaders are gathered around the banqueting table and becomes the center of attention from that point forward.

Note again the structure of Luke's summary of her actions in Scene 2.

- A she brought an alabaster vial of **perfume**,
- B<sup>38</sup> and standing behind Jesus at His **feet**, weeping,
- C she began to **wet His feet** with her tears,
- C' and **wiping them** with the hair of her head,
- B' and kissing His **feet**
- A' and anointing them with the **perfume**.

What were courtesies that should have been given to His head with anointing, and to His hands with a kiss, and to His feet by washing are now all focused only on the feet of Jesus.

Her anointing is clearly intentional because she has come prepared. But the washing of the feet appears to be spontaneous, because she has no towel with which to dry them and so it becomes necessary to use her hair to dry his feet.

#### Background Notes on the Woman's Actions

- **Alfred Edersheim observes that a prostitute would typically wear a flask with perfume around the neck and it would hang down between her breasts.** The flask was used both to sweeten her breath and perfume her body. But her intent now is quite different. She intends to pour out this alabaster vial of perfume on Jesus' feet, suggesting she won't need it any more for its usual, former purposes! But since it would have been unthinkable presumptuous for a woman to anoint the head of a rabbi, she plans a gesture of gratitude that will at the same time show her humility. She will anoint his feet.
- **She has already witnessed the shocking insult that Jesus received when He enters the house of Simon. He had not been honored with the kiss of greeting or the washing of the feet.** The omission is glaring, and she knows the insult is intentional! But Jesus has done nothing. He has absorbed the insult and the contempt behind it and is now reclining at Simon's table. In a foreshadowing of His coming passion according to the prophet Isaiah (53:7), "He opened not His mouth." Nonetheless, the woman is shocked! They did not even extend to him the kiss of greeting, and there had never been a rabbi in Israel like this one! Her adoration of

Christ and her anger with the Pharisee collide and embolden her to even more daring action than she had intended.

- Churning with emotion, she reflects for a moment: *“I cannot greet him with a kiss. That would be completely misunderstood and would give a totally wrong impression. But I could kiss his feet!”* So rushing forward, she literally floods his feet with her tears. But she has no towel, and Simon is certainly not about to do anything to assist her. So she boldly continues. She lets down her hair and with it wipes His feet. She the smothers them with kisses (the verb tense suggests she kissed his feet again and again), and then she pours out her vial of precious perfume on the feet of this One who has announced God’s love for sinners, who is here being mistreated by this calloused company of religious hypocrites.
- ***This act of letting down her hair was an act that a peasant woman was expected to do only in the presence of her husband.*** In fact, the Talmud later indicates how serious this action was if done in a public setting. It says that a woman could be divorced for letting down her hair in the presence of another man, and it also tells us that the rabbis considered the loosening of the hair to be in the same category as uncovering and exposing her breasts. So what she was doing here was viewed as a bold and shameless act with sexual overtones!
- So here’s the scene! ***An immoral woman lets down her hair in the home of a Pharisee in the company of his invited guests!*** The shock that must have gripped the room can hardly be imagined, and it did not go unnoticed. Silence fell over the banquet table, and the entire drama unfolds without a word being uttered, with the only sound being the sobs of this penitent woman. *For Simon, his neglect has backfired in his face by this embarrassing expression of devotion and gratitude to Jesus that filled in his neglected hospitality.*

But that’s not what Simon is thinking at all. His pharisaism has blinded him as we will see next week when we finish the story picking up here at Scene 3.