

Luke 7:36-50
The Sinner and the Self-Righteous Man

There are many reasons to believe the Christian faith. Arguments can be made from archaeology, fulfilled prophecy, and history. But the most convincing argument (in my opinion) is that found in Acts 2:14, “But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them, ‘Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words.’” The key phrase is “taking his stand.” Here is Peter, who only a few weeks before had fled and cowered before a servant girl, now standing boldly in public affirming the truth of the risen Christ. Only one thing can explain such a polar shift in personality. Peter knew he had seen the risen Christ and that Jesus was the Messiah.

Peter was not alone. There were other disciples who stood with him. Later, Saul of Tarsus who became Paul, became another example of a life changed upon encountering Jesus. Matthew, the tax collector turned disciple, the Samaritan woman, and Zacchaeus are others who offered personal testimony to the impact of Jesus on their lives. Think of the demon-possessed man at Gerasene, the young man raised from the dead in the village of Nain, Lazarus, the thousands who experienced the miracle of being fed from a few loaves of bread, and others. The list is extraordinary.

This passage offers us yet another example, and this particular account is only found in Luke. The woman described here was certainly “the least of these” (Matthew 25:45). She was the type of person the Pharisees loved to use as an example of how far a person could fall if they failed to keep the Law. Jesus chose to use her as an example as well. But His motive was far different, and had far greater implications.

This woman was just the type of person Jesus was looking for. People like her were lost sinners who recognized their sin. He had come, He would later say, “to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10). And this woman had been lost indeed.

The Setting

The Pharisees had many encounters with Jesus. They followed Him, talked with Him, and challenged Him on questions of the Law. In this case (and it is not the only time) a Pharisee invited Jesus to his home. There is no indication in the narrative that this man had a genuine interest in hearing from Jesus. Perhaps he wanted the opportunity to put Jesus on the spot or catch Him in some heresy. The Pharisee may have been motivated by curiosity or to see if He was indeed the great prophet of whom he had heard. He may also have had even more malicious motives. In any case, the room was filled with like-minded, self-righteous men who hoped to find cause against Jesus.

Luke, as usual, is not specific in the timing, but sometime after Jesus finished speaking, the Pharisee asked if He would come over to dinner. This invitation would not have been at all unusual (for one clergyman to entertain another), but the Pharisees in particular had no admiration for Jesus. Jesus “entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table” (v. 36). This was the common fashion for eating in the ancient Near East. Pillows were arranged around a low table and guests would squat, sit, or recline

as best they could. Furniture (tables [as we know them] and chairs or stools) were luxuries. It is easy to imagine that one would position himself so as to keep their dirty feet away from the food.

On special occasions, as when there was an honored guest, the door to the dwelling might be left open and people could gaze (or wander) in. This gave the host some opportunity to show off, and allowed others to listen in on the conversation about philosophy, theology, or current events from a learned teacher.

The Sinner

The only description we have of the woman is that she “was a sinner” (v. 37). Some recognize her as Mary Magdalene, but there is no biblical justification for that. Since Luke will introduce Mary in a few verses, it is unlikely he would be referring to her namelessly in this passage. The woman was well known, and she was well known as a sinner. There is no proof that she was a harlot, though that could be the case (the word used refers to sins of immorality). Somehow she had heard about Jesus. Had she been a follower for some time? Had she seen miracles and heard His teaching? We are not given answers to these questions, but she did know Who Jesus was, and from the events that followed, she had come to believe in Him. We can understand that she showed great courage coming to, and entering, the house of a Pharisee. She must have been very motivated.

The woman had with her an “alabaster vial of perfume” (v. 37). The container was expensive, as alabaster was imported usually from Egypt. It is likely that the perfume was equally valuable. She was “standing behind Him at His feet” (v. 38).

Her emotional state is easily discovered. She was crying and in her grief sought to demonstrate her love for the Savior in the only way that seemed appropriate. While the meal continued, she “began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume” (v. 38).

Jesus would have been leaning on His left arm (assuming He was right-handed), and His feet would have been behind Him. She would have knelt behind Him to wash His feet. Washing the feet of a guest was the lowliest job of the servant. It was degrading for a non-slave to do that. What was even more disconcerting, must have been the fact that this was a woman. Such behavior was not acceptable in the best of cases, and this was a woman whose character was not above reproach. It must have shown amazing courage of the woman to do this in the house of a Pharisee where she was certain to be rebuked, ridiculed, and cast out into the street.

The word used for kissing is the same word used by Luke later in describing the return of the prodigal son to his father. In that story, though the son has sinned grievously and acted foolishly, still “while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The kiss was not sensual, but it was nonetheless passionate. The same description is given in this passage of the kisses of the woman on the feet of Jesus. This as a woman deeply moved, and her loving response to Jesus was to serve Him in the best way she knew how.

The Self-Righteous Man

Clearly her actions were not unnoticed. Everyone must have begun to whisper and comment on why a rabbi was allowing such a woman to be so free with Him. The Pharisee, at whose house the meal was being held, simply presumed Jesus did not know any better. “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” (v. 39) he said to himself. In his own arrogance, he had determined that Jesus was simply ignorant of the social *faux pas* He was committing.

One can imagine the mix of emotions the Pharisee felt. He must have been both annoyed and gratified by the scene. After all, if Jesus was truly the Messiah, He would have known who it was that was washing His feet. That Jesus allowed the woman to do so, was proof of His ignorance and therefore proof that He was no great Prophet.

Jesus, calling the Pharisee by his name, addressed the question, even though it had not been verbalized. He did so, as so often He did, by telling a story which had, seemingly, an obvious point,

““⁴⁰Simon, I have something to say to you.’ And he replied, ‘Say it, Teacher.’ ⁴¹‘A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?’ ⁴³Simon answered and said, ‘I suppose the one whom he forgave more.’ And He said to him, ‘You have judged correctly’” (v. 40-43).

We learn here that the Pharisee, Simon, was not insulted by Jesus. Instead, Jesus asked him a simple question. This kind of conversation (question and answer) was common dialogue among rabbis. It was a way to sharpen their skills both in debate and in knowledge of the Torah and Talmud. Simon played along, apparently not seeing the obvious point. It is worth noting that even in His rebuke of Simon, Jesus is gracious enough to say Simon judged correctly.

The difference between the two debts was significant. The first was about two months wages; the second the wages of about 1 ½ years. The first debt could possibly be repaid in time, but not the second. Furthermore, by cancelling the debt, the moneylender incurred the costs. Lost on the crowd (but not on us) is the parallel with Jesus, dying of the cross to pay our debt.

The Point

The fact that the illustration was clear, did not mean Jesus did not need to drive home His point. The practical application was the key. So, Jesus continued,

““⁴⁴Do 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. ⁴⁵You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume” (v. 44-46).

Simon, the Pharisee, had not shown Jesus even the most common courtesies of the time.

Washing a guest’s feet, Genesis 18:1-4, “¹Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. ²When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, ³and said, ‘My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please

do not pass Your servant by. ⁴Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.’”

Judges 19:16-21, “¹⁶Then behold, an old man was coming out of the field from his work at evening. Now the man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was staying in Gibeah, but the men of the place were Benjamites. ¹⁷And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveler in the open square of the city; and the old man said, ‘Where are you going, and where do you come from?’ ¹⁸He said to him, ‘We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, for I am from there, and I went to Bethlehem in Judah. But I am now going to my house, and no man will take me into his house. ¹⁹Yet there is both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and also bread and wine for me, your maidservant, and the young man who is with your servants; there is no lack of anything.’ ²⁰The old man said, ‘Peace to you. Only let me take care of all your needs; however, do not spend the night in the open square.’ ²¹So he took him into his house and gave the donkeys fodder, and they washed their feet and ate and drank.”

Welcome with a kiss, Genesis 29:13, “So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister’s son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things.”

Exodus 18:7, “Then Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent.”

Anointed with oil, 2 Chronicles 28:14-15, “¹⁴So the armed men left the captives and the spoil before the officers and all the assembly. ¹⁵Then the men who were designated by name arose, took the captives, and they clothed all their naked ones from the spoil; and they gave them clothes and sandals, fed them and gave them drink, anointed them with oil, led all their feeble ones on donkeys, and brought them to Jericho, the city of palm trees, to their brothers; then they returned to Samaria.”

The Pharisee showed outward civility but not inward love. But demonstrating the contrast between the woman’s love, and Simon’s disinterest was not the point. The point was the motivation of the two behaviors. Continuing to look at the woman, Jesus said,

“⁴⁷For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.’ ⁴⁸Then He said to her, ‘Your sins have been forgiven.’ ⁴⁹Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this man who even forgives sins?’ ⁵⁰And He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” (v. 47-50)

In this conversation Jesus has proved three things. First, He knows the woman, her past, and her present condition. Second, He knows what Simon is thinking. These two demonstrate that He is a prophet. Third, He has the power to forgive sins. This is something God alone can do and that fact was not lost on the audience.

Jesus announcing her sins were forgiven was clearly a demonstration of His power. However, it also provided the woman with assurance, as her faith was new at best and probably very immature. Finally, it also let the crowd gathered about know that the woman was resorted to society.

The point Jesus makes is that the woman's behavior is a result of her having been forgiven. She weeps over her sin and offers Jesus all she can. Simon, however, is self-righteous. Therefore he feels no need for forgiveness, and consequently therefore no need to love Jesus. In explaining a parable later Jesus will say, "from everyone who has been given much, much will be required" (Luke 12:48). By receiving forgiveness for her sins, the woman had received greatly indeed. She was required to respond in kind, and she did so.

Of what have we been forgiven? What have we received as a result of faith in Christ? Can we offer any less than this woman? If the greatest proof of the Christian faith is the changed lives of followers of Christ, then how do we demonstrate that our lives have been changed? What is the difference between who we were and who we are?

Take Aways

Can we really say with Peter, "Lord, you know I love you"? If we do not truly love Christ, our obedience and service will soon grow cold and wither away.