

Many Sins Forgiven, Much Love Given

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Scripture Reading: Luke 7:36–50

Introduction

Most of us remember Jesus saying, “The last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.” But what does that mean, really? How should we understand that?

In almost all things in natural life, the first *are* first, *not* last, and the last *are* last, not first. But as we find with respect to *many* things in our Lord’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, it is the very reverse of the world. Instead of me trying to *describe* or *explain* what Jesus meant by those words, I would like to *show* what He meant using a true history.

Though we will consider the *entire* passage found in Luke 7:36-50, let me repeat at this time only Luke 7:47 to begin. “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.”

We will consider:

1. A noteworthy woman
2. A self-righteous man
3. A saved sinner

Setting

Jesus had entered into Capernaum, a town that He visited more than any other town except perhaps Jerusalem. He had just miraculously cured a Roman centurion’s servant. He had wondrously

raised a widow's son from the dead. He also demonstrated to John the Baptist's messengers that He was indeed the Christ of God, so that John would be reassured. But afterward, as Jesus spoke of John the Baptist being the greatest of all prophets, a two-fold reaction to His words can be seen.

First, there was the reaction of the "ordinary people." Verse 29 reads, "All the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John." These people, the ordinary, together with the scandalous publicans, justified God. In other words, they agreed with what Jesus was saying.

But then there is the other reaction (v. 30). "But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him." They evidently thought they knew better than Jesus and the people, and therefore did *not* repent in response to John's call to do so.

This already is a brief example of the last being first and the first last, the leaders rejecting God's prophet while the ordinary people believed him. Jesus then painted a word picture describing the leaders' reaction, comparing the unbelieving to children who would not play along with their friends, not wanting to play wedding or funeral. Jesus was saying these corrupt leaders neither rejoiced when the gospel was preached nor repented when the call to repent came to them. No, the leaders would instead slander both John and Jesus, falsely accusing John of being possessed and Jesus of being a glutton and drunkard. Right after this, however, a most curious invitation was given to Jesus. A Pharisee actually invited Him to a meal at the Pharisee's own home. That leads us to our first thought.

1. A noteworthy woman

Small towns differ from large cities in a number of ways, but one is, in a small town, it doesn't seem to take long for news to travel. After Jesus accepted the Pharisee's invitation we read, "And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner..." Our children might

think, “But isn’t everyone a sinner? Why does it say that about this one woman?” And they would have a point, since the word translated “sinner” was, after all, the ordinary Greek word used for that.

But this was a gracious way for Luke to somewhat shield us from the fact that this woman was a well-known sinner—sadly, well known for her sinful lifestyle, something the Pharisee clearly knew. So we would say this woman was famous, but not for good reasons. All the town seemed to know what she was doing, how she was living.

I wonder if a woman like that would be welcomed at the Lord’s Supper in our church? That might seem like a shocking question and for good reason, since the Lord’s Supper, as the Lord’s Supper form says, is not for those *living* in sin, delighting in it in an ongoing manner. But what if a woman or man or young person were saved by the Lord? Would he or she be welcomed to the Lord’s Supper then?

Perhaps some of us would be moved to tears of joy, thinking, “Has he or she been saved? Did Jesus deliver her too? Him too?” Maybe others would reserve judgment—let it winter; let’s see over time whether he or she really is a truly saved person. Perhaps still others might think, “What is *she* doing there? If the minister or elders knew what I know about her, she’d be turned away.”

Somehow the woman in this history learned that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee’s home. Verse 37 reads, “When she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, [she] brought an alabaster box of ointment.” If you’ve ever lived in sin, were notorious for your sinful life, you know it is no easy thing to come back to church or attend for the first time in your life. Shame can run deep, especially if most people at church know about you. And if people turn their heads, give that glaring, knowing look, it can be enough to send such a person right back out the door.

For this woman to enter a Pharisee’s home, uninvited, would normally have been a very, very difficult thing to do. Why? Pharisees had little time for, and even less interest in, infamous sinners. Those people needed to change, fix up their life, be like us. The

apostle Paul would later say that the Pharisees, as a group, were the strictest sect of religious leaders at the time. They pretended to be very holy, making sure everyone knew they fasted, gave tithes, made long prayers, and so on. But this woman—she was the very opposite. She was a *sinner*.

Jesus had once told a parable describing the Pharisees' attitude toward such people. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the publican? The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess," and on and on he would pray. So it would normally not be an easy thing for this lady to just walk into a Pharisee's home, while he was eating, uninvited. But she did! She wanted, she *needed*, to see someone.

So there she is, walking right into the Pharisee's house. But what is she carrying? An alabaster box of ointment. Think of an expensive container with a lovely perfume in it. Who was this for? What would she do with it? The Pharisee was clearly perplexed at first by all this. Not Jesus. We'll return to this woman a little later—what she was about to do was lovely and important. But first, we need to think a moment about another person in this history.

2. A self-righteous man

Pharisees, as we said, thought they were examples for the people, spiritual examples, following God's law seemingly without flaw. But since Jesus, as God, knew the heart and motives of all people, including all of us today, He had a very different view of most of them. Seven times in one chapter, Jesus called them "hypocrites," people who pretended to be religious but inside were clearly *not* that. But because most of them never experienced a serious uncovering by God of their sins to their consciences, and hence never truly experienced the love and mercy of God toward them, it was easy for them to look down on other people, holding themselves up as the standard. And that became clear in this history as well.

We won't yet give away what this woman did when she met Jesus, but just her being there and doing anything with Jesus offended the Pharisee. Verse 39, "Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner." Good people have no dealings with sinners like that. That's the way he saw things, this Pharisee. How do you see them? How eager, even comfortable, are *we* around those we don't know, especially those who it appears are trapped in sin? Is it, "Good people have no dealings with sinners"? Would you or I be flattered if someone called us a Pharisee?

I know in some churches there are those who have concerns about Lord's Supper attendance. Why do so many people attend? Do their lifestyles reflect love for the Lord and a life lived by His grace? Why do so many people come to the table compared with the number who attend, say, Bible studies or prayer services or midweek services? I have my concerns too. I have no doubt we are in need of revival. But I hope our concerns do not stem from a misunderstanding of the gospel and how it affects us, for clearly that was the case with this Pharisee. Let us see if we can understand what was about to unfold in his house.

Verse 38. She "stood at [Jesus's] feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment." It was customary in Israel to eat meals while reclining, kind of like laying on a couch with one's head propped up to eat. Lying that way, your legs would typically be behind you as the front of your body faced the low table. It would appear the woman intended to anoint Jesus's head with the precious ointment she brought, as that was a way to honor someone. But whether it was out of love or thankfulness or repentance or a combination of them all, she began to cry, her tears falling on Jesus's feet. Perhaps in response to this, she did something that was not customary, letting down her hair, which action would normally be quite questionable. She

likely did so because she didn't know how else to dry the tears that now covered Jesus's feet. It was not as unusual then as it would be now to kiss someone's feet, as that, too, was a sign of great respect and reverence. But a person would not keep doing that, which the verb tense indicates she did. Finally, perhaps out of a sense of embarrassment, she used the perfume to anoint Jesus's feet rather than His head, which would have been customary.

Why was she doing all this? It must have been quite a scene. It certainly caught the attention of the Pharisee, and he wasn't pleased. Why was a woman like this doing something like that to Jesus? But after a moment's thought, the Pharisee turned his attention from this woman to Jesus. Doesn't Jesus know who this is? How could He be a prophet and not know? Verse 39, "When the Pharisee which had bidden Jesus saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner." In the Greek, a clause starting with "if" could suppose a thing to be true, as in, "If he were a prophet (and he is)..." But written another way, the way it is in this text, it suggests the negative, as in, "If he were a prophet (but he must not be)..." In the Pharisee's mind, a prophet and a sinner don't belong together, evidently forgetting how many, many times God sent prophets to the people of Israel precisely when they sinned grievously!

So there we are—a notorious sinner, a self-righteous Pharisee, with the woman doing something to Jesus that was quite surprising, even shocking, while the Pharisee was questioning the whole scene before him. The only question that remains is, what will *Jesus* do and say?

3. A saved sinner

There's something about the woman in this history we haven't yet considered. It's not easy to spot right away, and the wording of verse 47 can be a little confusing for some if they're not careful. But before we go there, let us hear what Jesus has to say about what was happening before him. Jesus, not saying a word about the

woman (yet), begins by telling the Pharisee that He has something to say to him. “Master, say on,” he answers, feigning respect. Maybe the Pharisee thought, “Perhaps at last Jesus will comment on this woman and condemn her,” as he already had done in his own mind. Instead, Jesus had a simple riddle for the Pharisee to solve. “There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?” I think most of our children could answer that question. If a man forgives you a huge debt that you owe him, and then forgives someone else a really little debt, who would be most thankful? The Pharisee says the obvious, though he answers cautiously. “I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.” Jesus affirmed this to be the correct answer and then began the lesson. Verse 44, “He turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman?” Jesus speaks as if it were possible Simon didn’t see her, though of course Jesus knew Simon saw her, and He knew what he thought of her. Then Jesus began to explain how this woman, the sinner, showed more respect and kindness to Him, Jesus, than the Pharisee did.

The Pharisee did not provide wash water for Jesus’s feet, a custom befitting the hot, dusty climate. Such an act was a common courtesy for one’s guest. The woman washed Jesus’s feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair rather than the customary towel. It was also a sign of respect to greet a guest with a kiss on the cheek, something still done in some countries in Europe and in the Middle East. But though Simon did not so to Jesus, which was a sign of disrespect to the Savior, the woman kissed Jesus’s feet repeatedly. Again, it was an ordinary kindness to anoint a valued guest with a bit of oil. But Simon denied his guest even that courtesy. The woman anointed Jesus’s feet with the perfume. So instead of the Pharisee shaming Jesus, the self-righteous man was now the one bearing shame, as Jesus pointed out that this woman showed far more courtesy and kindness than he, the host, had done.

But we still are left with the question, Why did she do all this? Jesus explains, “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.” The meaning of Jesus’s statement has been contested over time, but it really need not have been. Some have suggested that because the woman loved Jesus so much, He forgave her. But that doesn’t fit the brief parable Jesus told Simon. In the parable, the debtor loved the one to whom he owed the money because he forgave him the debt. So it was with this woman. We therefore understand the verse to mean, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, on account of which she loved much.”

So now we know what had happened. Because this woman, notorious sinner that she was, heard and believed that Jesus saved sinners, had a heart for sinners, ministered to sinners, and even came to seek and save that which was lost, this drew her to Jesus, despite her shame and embarrassment. She was willing to endure the condemning looks of the Pharisee just so she could express her love to the one prominent religious leader who didn’t reject sinners like she had been. So whether these were tears of repentance, tears of love, tears of thanksgiving, or all these mingled together, she wept at Jesus’s feet.

I purposely haven’t given many of words of application so far because I wanted us to fully grasp what was happening in this scene, this history. But it’s time we look into this mirror, this part of God’s Word, and ask, “Who am I in this history?”

Am I the woman before casting herself on Jesus’s mercy and grace, still living in sin whether known or unknown by others? We don’t have to be a notorious sinner, a well-known sinner, because wicked sinners can hide their sins just as easily in a church behind a suit or dress as one who lives in the world. The Pharisees did that and so can we, God forbid. Are you still caught in sin, decidedly not in love with Jesus? If so, you need this Savior’s love to draw you out of your condition. So beseech Him for that.

Are you perhaps the Pharisee, content with your spiritual condition, judgmental of others, even if you don't claim to be saved yourself? Do you think like the Pharisees did, "At least I'm not like this or that person"? You realize, of course, that if you are most like this man, the Pharisee, Jesus uttered the most searing condemnations of such people during His ministry on earth. You would qualify as a "whited sepulcher."

Are you the woman in the act of turning to Jesus, even though you feel draped with a reputation from your past, perhaps also your present? Has God opened your eyes to see hope in the person of Jesus? Is He drawing you to Himself, teaching you that the enormity of your sinfulness can be overwhelmed by the enormity of His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, all for His own name's sake?

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we see this same history replayed. If people knew the past sins of many of us, they would blush. Yet it isn't our sterling reputation that draws us to the table—it is Jesus. And yes, maybe there is a Pharisee or two at the table. I know I certainly qualified as one and sometimes still can. But if that is the case, such a condition calls for repentance from us on account of our self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is disbelieving what God says about our righteousness—that it is nothing but filthy rags apart from Jesus. But might you be one who has nothing in self of which to boast yet have been given a heart of love for the Savior who gave you hope, the Savior who awakened you, drew you, convicted you, but then led you to cast your hope, your sins, your all upon Him, the only Savior?

Who are you, beloved? Where do you fit in? Where would you want to be in this history? Weeping at the feet of Jesus, telling Him, perhaps without words, how sorry you are for sinning so against Him? Offering back to Him, in service to Him, any gifts He's given you? Or are you too ashamed? Too uncertain? Not assured? Let us then see how the Lord comforted her and perhaps that will, in these last moments, also comfort you, O ye of little faith.

Verse 48, "And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven." Were not her sins already forgiven, even as Jesus alluded to earlier?

After all, she loved much because she was forgiven much. But beloved, herein is a very, very important lesson. She was drawn to Jesus before being assured of forgiveness. She came to Jesus despite her sins, despite her awful reputation and lifestyle, despite what others might have and did think of her. And so may a sinner today, even now! She was weeping at Jesus's feet, but He comforted her by letting her know that her past was past and that a new day had dawned. The past was past because the Lord put her sins away with His own precious sacrifice, His own precious blood shed on the cross. "He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19), or, as King Hezekiah once said, "Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back" (Isa. 38:17). The memory of our past ought to serve to humble us but not defeat us. Jesus welcomes sinners to bring their past, and their present to Him so that through faith in Him we may experience them being removed. Jesus "appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26).

Of course, Simon the Pharisee and other guests were shocked by Jesus saying this woman's sins were forgiven. Who did He think He was to just say that, thinking He could forgive sins, since only God could do that! Besides, where was the sacrifice? For without the shedding of blood, the blood of a sacrifice, there was no forgiveness possible. But the last time you witnessed the Lord's Supper being celebrated, you saw the sacrifice, i.e., the symbol pointing to the sacrifice, there on the Lord's Supper table. The sacrifice was made long ago, but its wondrous effects remain as powerful today as ever they did, including for notorious sinners.

Perhaps another Lord's Supper has come and gone. You may think it's too late, you missed it, it's past. But Jesus Christ is still here, beloved, clothed in the gospel. We reflect on His sacrifice, but we rejoice in His abiding presence. The golden scepter of His mercy is stretched out still to broken, repenting sinners. You may draw near, even as you are, to Him this very day. He will receive

you just as He received that poor weeping sinner. We do not expect Him to speak in a voice we can hear, but He speaks through His Word just as powerfully as He did with His voice then.

Notice that Jesus didn't respond to Simon when Simon questioned in his heart why Jesus thought He could forgive this woman's sins. No, Jesus had no more to say to Simon. The lesson was already given. And Jesus isn't obliged to answer your questioning of Him in the life of this or that sinner, for He was not sent to satisfy curiosities but instead to comfort penitents.

“And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” It would be foolish to conclude her faith was the ground of the woman's salvation. Faith is merely an instrument, a God-given means by which our trust rests in Jesus, not in ourselves or others. But see how, even though faith is a gift of God, Jesus called it her faith—“Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” The Lord works through our relying upon Him, through our trusting in Him, even as He works in us that trust in Him in the first place.

There the history ends. No more conversation. The woman departs. Jesus eventually departs. Simon is left to wonder about what he just saw and heard. Was he ashamed now of how he treated Jesus, his guest? Was he perhaps thinking, pondering, who this Jesus actually is? We don't know the answer to these questions, except to repeat what our Lord Himself once said. “Many are called; few chosen.” Many have heard the gospel, have read this history, and let it lie, walking back into the darkness of unbelief and sin. What will you do with this history, beloved?

A simple history with three persons in view—a sinner, a self-righteous man, and a Savior of sinners who still beckons, “Come unto me.” The day is far spent, the night is at hand—repent and believe the gospel. Repent and believe the Savior. Repent and believe and know and be assured that “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.”

Amen.