

Sermon – 15/05/2011 am

A Sinful Woman Forgiven

Study Text: Luke 7:36-50

We come to one of the most moving of all the personal encounters that Jesus had as he ministered in Galilee. We last saw Jesus at the city of Nain where he had compassion on a widow. He gave her back her only son after raising him from the dead. Wherever Jesus went he healed the sick and preached the Kingdom of God.

This preaching included a call to repent and believe in the gospel or good news (Mark 1:15). Jesus said *'come to me all you who labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'* (Matthew 11:28). He called to those who were weary and burdened by life and by their sin. The woman who came to the Pharisee's house to anoint the feet of Jesus must have heard what Jesus said. She may even have met Jesus at some time – we cannot be sure. She certainly knew the wonder of his grace.

There are three people in this account, namely Simon the Pharisee, the sinful woman and Jesus, the Son of God. We will look at each and learn from them. Jesus called the Pharisee 'Simon' which was a very common name at that time. This is not Simon Peter nor is it Simon the leper who lived at Bethany (Mark 14:3).

The other three gospels tell of Jesus being anointed by a woman at Bethany shortly before he went up to Jerusalem the last time. Apart from Jesus being anointed by a woman, and that on the head rather than the feet, there is no connection between those accounts and this one in Luke.

While the Pharisee is named, the woman is not. She is identified as a 'sinner' which probably means a prostitute. Jesus knew her name but graciously does not reveal it. The Pharisee knew her only as a sinner. The woman was not Mary Magdalene as some think, and as portrayed in popular books and movies. Mary Magdalene is named in the very next chapter. She is never referred to as a prostitute.

With these matters cleared up, let us now look at this moving narrative and the characters involved.

1. Simon the Pharisee

Jesus had previously been to a feast hosted by Matthew the tax collector. Now he goes to the house of a religious zealot to eat – Luke does not call it a feast. Jesus showed no partiality. He did not fear being defiled by a certain place, certain food or certain people. Jesus did not look on outward things; he looked on the heart. The Pharisee looked at this woman and judged her by her appearance and by the things she did. Jesus looked at her heart. He also looked at the heart of this Pharisee.

The state of a person's heart is, of course, reflected in what they do and say. What did the Pharisee do and say? It was more a case of what he did not do when Jesus came as a guest to his house. He did not offer Jesus water to wash his feet, as custom dictated. He did not greet his guest with a kiss; nor did he anoint his head with oil. Jesus was not properly honoured with such gestures. *You did not anoint my head with oil* (7:46). Jesus used a word for olive oil which was abundant and cheap in Israel. Simon did not even offer olive oil for Jesus to refresh his dry hair and skin.

Just why this Pharisee invited Jesus to his house we are not told. Was it out of curiosity? Was it because Jesus had gained such a large following that Simon thought it would be a good thing to be seen entertaining him – even at arm's length. Or was it in order to spy on Jesus? Whatever the reason, it was not his intention to honour Jesus in any way.

There are people who like to be seen doing the right thing. You will find them in churches even today – though arguably less than in previous generations. It is not as fashionable to go to church today but some still think it is the right and proper thing to do. Then there are those who have the good intention of one day coming to church.

There are also people who, like the Pharisee, want to see sinners kept out of the church. There are those who, as J.C. Ryle says of the Simon the Pharisee, ‘are profoundly ignorant of the nature of Christ’s gospel’. They love the church but hate any notion of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. They think the church is for respectable people, people who have a pedigree or prestige of some kind.

‘Simon, I have something to say you’ said Jesus (7:40) Rather grudgingly he answered ‘Teacher, say it’. And later he answered ‘I suppose the one he forgave more’ (7:43).

Simon said more to himself than he said to Jesus. When he saw Jesus letting this 'sinner' touch him he mumbled ‘If this man were a prophet he would know what kind of woman she is’ (7:39). Jesus knew perfectly well who this woman was. He also knew what Simon was muttering to himself.

Jesus is very good at knowing what people are mumbling about – and what they are gossiping about. He even knows our thoughts – which can be frightening, or comforting, depending on your thoughts. The woman who came to Jesus weeping said nothing but Jesus knew her thoughts. They were thoughts of love for the one who forgave her sin and set her free.

2. Sinful Woman

Privacy was not a big thing in New Testament times; nor is it nowadays in many cultures. If we were invited to a home in a village in India it was not unusual to have many onlookers. Homes were much more open than ours; dinners were not held behind closed doors.

Jesus was invited to the Pharisee’s house, probably with other guests, but they did not meet behind locked doors. When a certain woman in the city heard where Jesus was she went there to anoint him with oil; not olive oil but fragrant oil or perfume. As you know, there is a big difference in price between a bottle of olive oil and a bottle of Chanel No 5.

Although the woman had access to the house she knew she would not be welcome. It took great courage for her to leave her quarters on the dark side of town and come to the house of a religious leader. But she was determined to show her gratitude to Jesus who ‘first loved her’.

The woman found Jesus reclining at the table. People did not sit at a table in those days but reclined on low couches, leaning on their left arm with their feet pointing away from the table. As she stood there at his feet she was overcome and started to weep. Was she overcome with sorrow for her sin, or was it with joy at the amazing grace of Jesus in forgiving her sin? The two things go together, do they not? This is what we learn from this passage.

The woman’s tears fell on Jesus’ feet (7:38). She bent down to wipe his feet with her long hair. She then kissed the feet of her Saviour and Lord – and kept on kissing them (7:45). Remember Simon did not even greet Jesus with the kiss of a friend. Kissing a person’s feet is perhaps the greatest act of humility.

The woman had brought with her a small bottle of expensive perfume. It would have been one of the most precious possessions of this sort of woman. Oil was normally poured on a person’s head but this woman did not feel worthy to do that. She broke open the bottle and poured it on the feet of Jesus, the Son of God.

The woman held nothing back; she gave her tears, she gave her hair, she gave her expensive perfume; she gave her pride, she gave her heart and life to Jesus. Could she have given more? What have you given to Jesus out of love for what he has done for you? (Romans 12:1)

3. Son of God

Simon the Pharisee was not impressed by what this woman was doing – but Jesus was. He knew her heart just as he knew Simon's. The conversation around the table hushed to a whisper as everyone gazed at Jesus and this sinful woman at his feet. Jesus broke the silence by telling Simon a short parable and then asking him a simple question. What a wise teacher Jesus is!

There were two debtors who owed another man some money. One owed him 500 denarii and the other 50. A denarius was roughly a day's wage. Neither could pay the debt. One day the creditor decided to cancel their debts. The question for Simon was, which one would love that man the most. The answer was obvious. Simon had to agree that it was the man who was forgiven the most. If he did not realise where Jesus was going with this question he was soon to find out.

Jesus was teaching Simon, and all at the table, and all standing around, a very important lesson. It is a lesson that we must be careful not to get wrong however. Simon gave the right answer, but what was the point of the parable? After rebuking Simon for his attitude towards Jesus, and pointing out the very different attitude of the sinful woman, Jesus explained the parable. The person forgiven little loves little, while the person forgiven much loves much (7:47).

What does this mean – or not mean?

Firstly, Jesus did not mean that this woman was forgiven because of her love, so abundantly demonstrated in this scene. She had many sins – who does not! She was forgiven her many sins *for she loved much* (7:47). In other words, her many sins were forgiven **therefore** she loved much. Her love was the consequence not the cause or condition of her salvation. It was the result of her forgiveness, not the reason behind it.

This woman was not seeing Jesus for the first time. She had heard what he preached. The Holy Spirit had convicted her of her sin; she had repented and received forgiveness just as Jesus said. Jesus reassured her of that forgiveness as she knelt weeping at his feet. He was also assuring Simon and the others that he had forgiven her, sinful woman that she was.

In the end Jesus said to her *'Your faith has saved you. Go in peace'* (7:50). Not her love but her faith in Jesus saved her. It was not her display of affection or anything else that she did that saved her. She was saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Secondly and briefly, Jesus was not saying that terrible sinners will love him more than people who have lived what we call a good life. In God's eyes Simon was just as much a sinner as the prostitute. The difference was she saw her sin and repented, while he did not see his sin.

When you come to Jesus and see him as this woman did you will be similarly overwhelmed by your sin and your unworthiness to be in the presence of the Son of God. You will see that all your good works are as filthy rags. You will not claim a pinch of your own righteousness because even that pinch will be, in the language of the apostle Paul (Philippians 3), but a pinch of dung!

How much do you love Jesus? How much have you been forgiven? Just a little?

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