

Sermon: There's No Comparison

Text: Luke 7:36-50

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Introduction: Nearly two-hundred years B.C.E. Pharisees started to make their presence felt. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were deeply entrenched in Jewish society. “Pharisees were among the upper classes.” They lived in “closed communities,” and numbered about 6000 during Herod’s rule (Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus*, pp. 246-247). Even though there are other narratives with similar information where Jesus is anointed, this account is unique to Luke. The woman in our story is not named, nor does she speak in Luke’s record. This may be a way of comparing her to the Pharisee who enjoys being heard and even to Jesus, who speaks the majority of the time.

This woman had undoubtedly heard Jesus teach before, possibly at that morning’s services. She may have heard Jesus say:

Matthew 11:28 (NIV) ²⁸“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

This was Good News, indeed, that this woman who was labeled a “sinner” (v. 39) could find acceptance and relief from the Pharisees’ twisted view of what God wanted. Sin and guilt can be oppressive; and if you feel unaccepted by people who say they represent God, it is not a far journey to imagine God rejects you, too.

Some of the commentaries and sermons on this passage call the woman, a *prostitute*. Some do it to provide alliteration with *pharisee* and *prophet*; others simply do not properly understand the Greek word that is used (‘αμαρτωλος). The word translated *sinner* has no particular sexual connotation, and actually “is one who does not subject himself to the Pharisaic ordinances... He is not a sinner because he violates the Law, but because he does not endorse the Pharisaic interpretation.” - TDNT, Vol. I, p. 328

Jesus is even called “sinner” because he did not keep sabbath law the way the Pharisees prescribed.

This is not Mary Magdalene, who also was not a prostitute. This is not the anointing of Jesus’ head at the home of Simon the leper (**Matt. 26:6ff**) by another unnamed woman. It is not Mary who anointed Jesus after her brother, Lazarus, was raised from the dead (**John 12:3**). Our story begins.

Luke 7:36 (NIV) ³⁶Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table.

Once at the Pharisee's house, the focus goes on the woman and what she does to Jesus. Here we have:

I. An Act of Love Misunderstood (vv. 37-39)

Luke 7:37-39 (NIV) ³⁷When 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, ³⁸and 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. ³⁹When 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."

"The scene is in the courtyard of the house of Simon the Pharisee. The houses of well-to-do people were built round an open courtyard in the form of a hollow square. Often in the courtyard there was a garden and a fountain; and there in the warm weather meals were eaten. It was the custom in the east and when a Rabbi was at a meal in such a house, all kinds of people came in - they were quite free to do so--to listen to the pearls of wisdom which fell from his lips." Barclay, *Luke*, pp. 92-93

This day, Simon, Jesus and the other male guests would have been reclining at table supported on their left elbows with their feet behind them. All the other assembled visitors would have been around the perimeter of what may have been a courtyard, or as Edersheim (Vol. I, p. 564) suggests a dining hall little more than a 15-foot square in area.

Enter our unnamed woman:

A. What is she doing? (v. 38)

She is weeping. This is a flood of tears that soak Jesus' feet. Jesus had said before:

Luke 6:21b (NIV) ^{21b} Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Weeping expresses acknowledgment and acceptance of God's rule.

Weeping is recognition of one's dependence on God.

Weeping is recognition of one's inadequacy before God. It is when you have exhausted all your own efforts. It can be a "cry for help;" but I think here, these may be tears of joy.

She is drying Jesus' feet with her hair. Maybe because of her outburst of emotion toward Jesus, she forgets herself and where she is. For a Jewish woman to let down her hair in the presence of other men was grounds for divorce. It was considered completely inappropriate and immodest behavior.

She is kissing Jesus' feet. Kissing the feet of rabbis was a sign of reverence and respect (Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, p. 211). The kisses being applied to Jesus' feet were in no way meant to be sexual because the Greek word used here (καταφιλεω) is never used in the N.T. for that kind of kiss. This is a kiss of special respect, a sign of repentance.

Jeremias comments in his book *The Parables of Jesus* on p. 126: "to kiss a person's knee or foot (v. 38) is a sign of the most heartfelt gratitude, such as a man might show to one who had saved his life."

She is using expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. This is not ordinary at all. The extravagance of this goes beyond what would be customary. Many Jewish women would carry a vial of expensive perfume around their necks which in some cases might be 1/10 of their dowry.

All this was more than an act of hospitality that Simon had failed to provide. It was an example of a truly thankful person who realized what Jesus had done for her - not just her self-esteem, but her soul. She had experienced God's love, and now she was demonstrating hers the only way she knew how.

Those who understand grace will not measure their response, but fully show their appreciation.

The next question is:

B. What is *she* doing here? (v. 37)

Simon noticed there was a known sinner in their midst, and she was close to Jesus. She might defile him, and then the whole dinner would be ruined. A woman was not allowed to approach an unrelated man, let alone touch an important rabbi. This is someone who does not know, or worse, does not care about the rules. This is the kind of person who might blow on vichyssoise soup to cool it, or use the wrong fork for dessert. But all kidding aside, this was deadly serious stuff.

More importantly if Jesus was not going to play by the rules (and there were plenty):

C. What is Jesus doing here? (v. 39)

The Pharisee must have thought he had invited an imposter to his house. The Pharisee thought that Jesus could not be a prophet if he were going to put up with this kind of violation and show complete disregard for his ritualistic purity.

Jesus continues to have contact with the outcasts and weak in society. In no other Gospel does Jesus do more to include women in his salvation plan.

Maybe Jesus wasn't a prophet the Pharisee thought to himself, but ironically Jesus gives proof that he is at least that by reading Simon's mind.

Luke 7:40 (NIV) ⁴⁰Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said.

Jesus knew there was:

II. A Lesson to Be Taught (vv. 40-43)

Luke 7:41-43 (NIV) ⁴¹“Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

This is an obvious parable that Jesus shares with the Pharisee. It is a gift that Jesus allows him to open, so Simon may draw his own condemning conclusions. In the story:

A. Each person owes money. (v. 41)

One person owes the moneylender 50 denarii and the other owes 500. This is the equivalent of either a few months or a couple years of wages for the working person. It is no small sum in either case. The fact is:

B. Each person is unable to repay his debt. (v. 42a).

If you cannot afford something, something even reasonably priced, it might as well be a million dollars. If you have to jump 50 feet or 500 feet to safety, neither is possible. Most of us would have trouble with five! Or if you are drowning in 50 feet or 500 feet of water, it matters little. You need outside help to be saved!

The point is that this debt can never be paid unless there is Someone who will pay it for us. (Illus. Judge Lynch paid for my membership to the YMCA when I was growing up.) The unnamed moneylender is obviously a figure for God in our story. It plays out so that:

C. Each person’s debt is forgiven. (v. 42b)

There are little debtors and big ones when it comes to sin, but both require divine help. Both require an acknowledgment of the debt or sin. Grace is extended to those who can accept this generous offer. All these words of debt and owing and forgiveness sound a lot like the Lord’s Prayer, so we must understand this parable on more than one level.

At the end of the lesson, like any good teacher:

D. Jesus tests his student. (v. 43c)

If you think about it: “Gospel parables are addressed to Jesus’ critics not to sinners looking for God.” - Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 145. Many times parables needed explanation or interpretation. This one, however, is clear, and the Pharisee gets an A+, but lacks the understanding of how this applies to him.

E. Simon understands intellectually. (v. 43)

The Pharisee understands the implication of Jesus’ story as it might apply to others. He just does not see how he is in the story. He feels he is good enough and needs no one to cancel his debts, his sins. Ironically, it is that false sense of righteousness that is the real obstacle to having one’s sins forgiven. Self-righteousness kills love and blinds people of the truth that they need God in their lives.

Finally from Jesus’ lips:

III. An Affirmation and Command Given (vv. 44-50)

Luke 7:44-50 (NIV) ⁴⁴Then 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. ⁴⁵You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

A. The sinner is judged better than the saint. (vv. 44-50a)

Jesus says, “do you see this woman?” For everyone in the room this woman is a living parable. All focus turns on the one who everyone had avoided and shunned out in public. For at least the moment Jesus turns his back on his esteemed host. Jesus wants to allow him to overhear his affirmation of the woman and his rebuke for him.

Love is the result of forgiveness (v. 47). Jesus says that it is clear. There is evidence that this shunned woman, this sinner has been forgiven. Look at the ways in which she has demonstrated love. The unnamed woman forgot about herself and gave what she could to show her thankfulness and her gratitude. Whenever we give our best to God - it is enough!

“The gospel is like a banker walking up to us when we cannot pay our mortgage; rather than foreclosing, he writes a check that pays off the debt. If you met a banker like that, you would always be grateful to him and tell your friends about him. God is that spiritual banker, who has paid our debt of sin through Jesus.” - Bock, *Luke*, p. 225

God's forgiveness (salvation) comes through faith (vv. 48-50a).

There have been theological discussions over this passage. Does salvation come as a result of love? Yes. God's love! The only act of love that saves is the one-time sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sins. The only limiting factor in all of this is our heart, not God's. Human love grows out of forgiveness, not the other way around.

Or does salvation come through faith? The correct answer is "through faith." This can be readily cleared up when you understand the Greek verb tenses used here. The NIV text reads: **Luke 7:48 (NIV)** ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." It sounds like a present tense, but this is a passive perfect which means that the forgiveness took place before this meeting, and that it remains in effect in the present.

The whole point of the parable is that neither debtor can do anything to cancel his obligation, and it is sheer grace that provides the solution to the problem. The entire Protestant Reformation emphasized salvation by faith as opposed to works. We continue to believe what Jesus says here.

Luke 7:50 (NIV) ⁵⁰Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

And once a person receives what is salvation, he understands:

B. Salvation produces peace! (v. 50b)

This is the peace one has when he or she has done what God asks and has accepted Jesus as their Savior. There is no peace in comparing ourselves to other sinners. Peace only comes when we realize the Savior accepts us and includes us in his family.

Romans 5:1-2 (NIV) ¹Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Conclusion: When you look at Jesus and Simon there is no comparison. "Here are two religious leaders suddenly in the presence of a sinful woman. One has an understanding of righteousness which causes him to distance himself from her; the other understands righteousness to mean moving toward her with forgiveness and a blessing of peace." - Craddock, *Luke*, p. 105

When you look at the woman and Simon there is no comparison. In fact, should we all not be found at Jesus' feet in gratitude and worship? Whatever we have been forgiven, the debt was too big for any of us to pay. How do you compare to the woman?

There is danger today for those like the Pharisees who were called “holy ones” or saints of today to develop the same kind of community-mentality that would exclude the very people Jesus would want us to invite in. When you look at Jesus and then we look at ourselves there is no comparison. We should not compare ourselves to anyone, but repent of our pride and throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus.

“Should not the church, while upholding God’s truth and character, be equally open to outsiders.” Bock, *Luke*, p. 222

And whenever we discover sinners among us, we should know that what they need is “a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. *Our* story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, “You are welcome here.” - Craddock, *Luke*, p. 106