

Those Who Are Forgiven Much, Love Much
Luke 7:36-8:3
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Read Luke 7:36-8:3

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

There is a unique kind of ministry that has sprung up throughout the US based out of various churches that only uses women as volunteers and staff people. There are various names of these ministries, like Love's Way Out, Jesus Loves Dancers, Eve's Angels, Stripped Free, Hadassah's Hope, and Revealing God's Love, that are all groups that send Christian women into adult nightclubs to befriend and love the women who work there. (Now you understand why the volunteers are all female.) These ministries usually start with a woman or group of women who feel a burden to help those who work at these clubs to feel loved and to feel that there is a way out of that lifestyle. They will simply visit the clubs with baked goods or Christmas gifts, and offer friendships to the women, who often feel trapped with no other options, or are struggling with addiction, or are victims of human trafficking, abuse, and manipulation. One ministry, Scarlet Hope in Louisville, KY, has helped 600 women leave that life for better careers and seen hundreds of women accept Christ.¹

One volunteer with one of these ministries said this: "It's a privilege to spend time with these girls, my friends, at the club. I'm 100% convinced the only difference between them and me is they don't know yet they are fearfully and wonderfully made by a Savior. Most of them have been abused and told how worthless they are for so long that they wholeheartedly believe it. Their pasts are heartbreaking."² How beautiful that Christian women can look past the ugliness of these environments and refuse to judge these women for what they've been involved in and offer them the love of Christ that can transform their lives and redeem their souls.

Our sermon text this morning finds Jesus in the presence of a woman who was involved in a similar compromising lifestyle. While others who saw this woman only saw her sin and how she fell far short of "acceptable behavior," Jesus saw the redemption that God was working in her heart and loved her in a profound way. There are some hard questions we'll need to ask ourselves if we want to be Christlike, to love and treat people the way that Jesus did.

The first five verses show us a dinner party that is interrupted, and the host,

I. The Pharisee Expressed Disdain (vv. 36-40)

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. ³⁷ And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸ and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort

¹ "Sharing Dinner and Jesus with Strippers," found at the gospelcoalition.org website.

² Gospeltaboo.com/home/why-i-go-into-strip-clubs

of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.”⁴⁰ And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he answered, “Say it, Teacher.”

Put yourself in the Pharisee, Simon’s, place. He had invited Jesus over to his house for dinner. We know all about the friction between Jesus and the Pharisees, so either Simon was trying to trap Jesus (as the Pharisees often tried), or he was one of Jesus’ few admirers among that group, or he was just genuinely curious to know more. Having someone into your home for dinner was a very big deal in that culture, it definitely communicated a deep level of friendship, so that makes me lean towards thinking that Simon wanted a good relationship with Jesus. But then we think through the common courtesies that were extended to visitors in that culture: greeting them with a kiss, providing water to wash the dust off their feet, and placing oil on their foreheads before dinner. In verses 44-46, Jesus pointed out that Simon had done none of those things on His behalf, and it seems that Simon was intentionally disrespecting Jesus.

In the middle of dinner, in walked a woman who did three things to Jesus’ feet: first she started weeping and her tears got on His feet so she used her hair to wipe them, then she started kissing the feet, then she anointed them with ointment. Now, let’s just clear this up early on: the woman who came to anoint Jesus’ feet is called a “*woman of the city, who was a sinner*” in verse 37. She was most likely a prostitute, she made her living selling her body. (Some commentators say no, but it seems most likely.) And now she’s doing all this stuff with Jesus’ feet in the middle of Simon’s house during dinner. The Talmud, the Jewish book that contained all these extra rules that weren’t in the Scriptures, said that a woman was not supposed to let her hair down for anyone except her husband. So using her hair to wipe Jesus’ feet must have looked entirely inappropriate. Simon was disgusted; he was indignant that Jesus was letting this happen. Remember last week’s passage where Jesus acknowledged that people called Him “*a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.*” This was what He was talking about! This incident would have fired up the rumor mills once again.

Simon only saw with human, judgmental eyes: “There’s a holy Man that I have honored by having over to my house, but now this sinful woman is defiling the whole thing by touching Him. And He’s oblivious to who she really is, or else He would stop it.” But Jesus saw with spiritual eyes and knew that this woman was doing these things in a spirit of love and repentance. Why did she start weeping? It sounds like she planned the anointing, but I think the tears were a surprise. I can imagine that a prostitute would have carried around a lot of shame for who she was, particularly around the upright religious people. But either she had heard Jesus’ teaching and been convicted, or she had heard from enough people that there was a man visiting the area who would free her from her guilt and shame. And in the presence of Jesus, she probably felt a holiness that she had never been around. Here was a man who offered true love, who did not want to use her as most of the men in her life had. She must have felt Jesus’ acceptance, otherwise you would assume she would have run out of the room. Even if others looked down on her, Jesus did not rebuke her or discourage her.

Some commentators think that the ointment the woman used on Jesus’ feet was likely very expensive, perhaps costing up to a year’s wages. This was a shocking extravagance that the woman obviously deemed worth it. She had found the one person that she thought was worthy of her tears, of her resources, of her giving everything and risking humiliation in front of a crowd of respectable people. But she didn’t care. That is a love for Jesus that I’m not sure I am able to express. I am usually not ready to risk losing control of my emotions, my reputation, or giving up all my money to worship the Lord. But I should be; her honoring Jesus puts me to shame.

Jesus knew what Simon was thinking and He answered with a parable and a challenge that showed **II. The Sinful Woman Exercised Great Love and Faith (vv. 41-50)**

⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then 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. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." ⁴⁸ And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Simon answered Jesus' hypothetical situation correctly. It's easy to see how someone who owed ten times as much money was much more grateful than the one with the lower debt. Hopefully, Simon was able to connect the dots for what Jesus said next: he was the smaller debtor, so he, therefore, did not feel the need to treat Jesus with respect and love by greeting Him with a kiss and washing His feet. The woman is the one with the huge debt forgiven who pours out her thankfulness in love. Both of them were debtors to God, both of them should feel gratitude for being forgiven their debt; but Simon expressed only ingratitude and entitlement whereas the woman was profoundly grateful.

In verse 44, it says that Jesus turned towards the woman before saying to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Jesus was inviting Simon to look deeper, to see beyond his categories, that she was just a dirty sinner to him. Jesus was inviting him to see her as someone who was redeemed and made clean, and because of that she was a model of love that he could learn from. And Christians through every age have been learning from her ever since. There is a singer/songwriter named Justin McRoberts who has a song called, "With Your Eyes," whose lyrics are: "If I had been far less inclined to rush to judgment, anger, and ridicule / If I had been far more in love with You / If I had looked close and recognized it was You in that human disguise / I'd have asked to see You with Your eyes / Lord, help me to see them the way You see me / With Your eyes I know I would learn to see beyond the fall into the need." Oh that I would see people with God's eyes, as objects of His love and mercy, not as failures and objects of our scorn and disgust. After all, God looked on me with mercy and not judgment.

Mark Dever, a pastor in DC, comments that, "The Pharisee thought he was forgiven by God because of how well he loved God. And at first, that appears to be exactly what Jesus is saying, 'her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much.' We love people so that God will love us. Yet as Jesus continues, we realize that's not his point at all. 'But he who is forgiven little, loves little.' Love doesn't cause forgiveness. It's the other way around, isn't it? Forgiveness is what causes love!... Our love is proportional to our understanding of forgiveness."³

So those equations, "she who is forgiven much loves much" and "he who is forgiven little loves little," are true of both our love of God and of other people. When we truly understand our forgiveness in Christ, we lavish our praise on God and are so grateful that He loves rotten sinners like us. But we also look around at others and love them greater because we don't hold things

³ Mark Dever & Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 44.

against them that we used to. 1 John 4:19-21 says it directly: *“We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”* Because God has accepted us, we have grace for our family members, for our neighbors, for our friends, even for our enemies. How can I treat you with contempt and judgment when God has forgiven all the garbage and evil in my heart?

This woman who washed Jesus’ feet is one of many who responded and followed Jesus. We read of **III. The Women of Faith Supported Jesus and the Disciples (8:1-3)**

¹ Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

Jesus and the twelve apostles were fully engaged in their tasks of ministering to the people and were no longer working carpentry, fishing, tax collecting, and other trades they had engaged in to support themselves. So just like missionaries today have supporters who contribute to their ministries, so they had people who provided material support, and this passage singles out the women who helped. In that society, women were often seen as property if they weren’t completely invisible, so it is significant that Jesus desired them to play a major role in contributing to the ministry of the church.⁴ You have these women who had been demon-possessed, most likely on the lower end of the socio-economic scale, all the way up to the wealthy women like Joanna, whose husband was an important man in Herod’s house.

I love that this text comes right after the story of the woman of the street, because it tells us that she probably followed the example of these other women and did all she could to support the ministry and travel of Jesus and the twelve. She left her old life of selling her body and found new life and community among Jesus’ followers. This is also a reminder that because our Lord valued the gifts and ministries of women, we should look to affirm and include women’s gifts in every way possible that the Scriptures permit. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that most churches would essentially collapse without the work of the women of the church. Men lead, have the ordained positions, but women’s gifts and contributions are equally valuable and absolutely crucial.

Conclusion

As we think about this passage as a whole, I want us to think about this question: Do we push people away from Jesus because they don’t meet our standards? Because they don’t act right or don’t look right? Those of us who have been inside the church and Christian culture for a long time know how to act, know how to look the part of mature Christians, right? We know the words to say, the Christianese, we know the topics to avoid. But new believers or people who have lived in the world but are being drawn into the church don’t know how to fit in right away. And they’re nervous, and it doesn’t take much for someone’s insensitive comment or outright rebuke to hurt them or drive them away. Are we willing to be patient with people as they come to faith and grow in their love for the Lord, and not harshly demand they be picture-perfect Christians? Are we willing to see people for what God can make of them, or will we only see them for what they’ve been? That’s the challenge to us so that Jesus doesn’t have to rebuke us like He did Simon.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 220-1.

Sexual sin, in particular, can feel so shameful that people have a hard time bringing those sins to God and being willing to admit them in a church setting. It's easier to hide them from God and others. But no sexual sin is unforgiveable. There are certainly consequences: unplanned pregnancy, diseases, unhealthy emotional attachments; God wants to save you from those things. He designed marriage to be the place for sexual expression, not because He wanted to keep us from joy and pleasure, but because that is the best place to experience it. I hope that our church and the churches of today can balance grace and truth. We don't want to be like the Puritan community in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* where we make an adulterer wear a big red "A" on their chest. Of course, nobody does that literally, but too often people are made to feel that kind of shame. At the same time, we should not back down from declaring the truth and holding people to their vows of acting Christlike; but we will do so out of love and concern, not anger and judgment.

Let us pray that we see others as God sees them: as sinners in need of His grace. But let us also see ourselves with great humility, aware of our own failings. Let us follow the example of Paul, who said in 1 Timothy 1:15, "*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*" St. Francis said something similar: "There is nowhere a more wretched and miserable sinner than I."⁵ John Newton, who wrote "Amazing Grace," used to remind himself: "Don't ever forget who you were, how much in debt you were, what God has done for you."⁶ If we think that we are morally superior and better than those nasty sinners, we are Pharisees and Jesus has harsh words for us. Who do you want to live like: the judgmental hypocrite who ticks off Jesus, or the humble sinner who throws himself on God's mercy and is praised by Jesus and justified by God?

It doesn't really matter if your testimony is that you were a stoner and a raging alcoholic, angry, high school dropout, juvenile delinquent or if you were a straight-A student, Boy Scout, thoughtful citizen who always recycled and followed the rules. Both kinds of people are saved by grace through faith. You may identify more with Simon the Pharisee or more with the anointing prostitute. (I happen to be a recovering Pharisee myself.) Some people say, "God would never let a guy like me into heaven" while other people say, "I've done enough on my own that I don't need God's help." Neither one of those people understands grace. Nobody is too bad that the Lord can't save them, nobody is too good that they don't need God's love. No matter who you are, you have sins that separate you from a holy God. You have a debt that needs to be repaid; it doesn't matter the size of the debt. If you die with that debt still on your account, you will be thrown into debtor's prison for all eternity. But God offers one way to erase your debt: by Jesus paying it with His life. You need the sacrificial death of Jesus to pay for your sins and save you. Jesus' death works for the big sinner and the little sinner in the exact same way.

To answer the question of the dinner guests back in verse 49, "*Who is this, who even forgives sins?*": Jesus is the Son of God, one person of the Trinity that makes up the full Godhead. He is able to pronounce forgiveness to sinners because He is God, and because His death made our forgiveness possible. The amazing thing is that not only is my debt erased, but God goes much farther than that: He spiritually blesses me with a fortune. He makes me His heir who upon death will inherit the riches of eternity and heaven. Jesus' story in this passage imagined only debt being cancelled, but His resurrection would provide the spiritual riches that give us far more than we could imagine. If it sounds too good to be true, it's not. It's just the good news of the Gospel, and it is available for you when you are willing to humble yourself, repent, and make Jesus your Lord and Savior.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 290.

⁶ Frank M. Barker, Jr.'s sermon "The Parable of the Two Debtors" from *The Gospel of Luke* (self-published).