

Week 6 – The Sinful Woman and the Pharisee – Luke 7:36-50

Scripture Reading: Psalm 49:1-20

Introduction

Our account this morning is a bit of a deviation from the accounts we've looked at thus far in our series

In each of the first five accounts, Jesus dealt with individual people – some who understood their depravity and some who did not yet fully appreciate their true condition

But this week, as we look at **Luke 7:36-50**, we are going to see Jesus interact for the first time with two people at once

And, while we will consider how Jesus related to these two very different individuals, the real value in this account is what we may well learn about ourselves and how our opinion of ourselves impacts how we approach others evangelistically

As we proceed, I want you to allow this passage to serve as a kind of mirror

Ask yourself honestly which of the two main characters in the account best reflects you and your attitude toward the whole idea of sin, spiritual need, the gospel, and salvation as those things pertain to you personally

If you are taking notes, we will look first at the scenario before us as we consider the situation Jesus found himself in and the two characters he interacted with

Then we will look at how Jesus responded to each of them individually according to their personal situation

And then we will consider what lessons we should learn from this passage and how the way we view ourselves affects our approach to the people around us as we seek to share the gospel

So, if you haven't done so already, let me encourage you to open your Bible to Luke 7 and follow along as I read verses 36-38 which set up the scene [**Luke 7:36-38**]

One of the Pharisees asked him [Jesus] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. 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, 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.

I. The Scenario

In our scenario we have Jesus accepting the invitation to dine at the home of a Pharisee

Unlike our passage last week when we saw Jesus go to the home of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, this invitation would not have caused any grumbling because it would have been seen as a perfectly proper home for Jesus to visit

Based on the way the Pharisees are described in the Bible, we have the tendency to imagine them as villains

I suppose we can be excused for thinking that way because they are so often presented as foils for Jesus who seems to constantly be at odds with them

But just who were the Pharisees?

It might surprise you to learn that the Pharisees were thoroughly committed to serving God to the utmost

They were faithful in attending worship and their daily prayers

The Pharisees were dedicated to the daily reading of God's Word and making application of it in their daily lives and they were committed to teaching it to others so they might do likewise

They meticulously sought to obey God's commandments and they were devoted to making sure that God had dominion over every aspect of human life

That sounds like the portrait of the kind of person any church would welcome and consider themselves blessed to have as a member of their congregation, doesn't it?

Most of us would be thrilled to have people describe us in those terms

The Pharisees were also acutely aware of the problem of sin

They were so scrupulous about righteous living that they became very sensitive to sin They took very seriously the Apostle Paul's warning from **1Corinthians 15:33** that *"bad company ruins good morals"*

And they sought to avoid the corruption of those who they believed to be *sinner*s by refusing to have contact with them

All of a sudden, a woman who was certainly not an invited guest entered the home of this particular Pharisee

And all we are told about her is that she was a *"woman of the city"* and that she was known a *"sinner"* [**Luke 7:37**]

We aren't told what her particular sin was but I don't think we'd be amiss if we thought of her as a prostitute or a woman who was otherwise sexually promiscuous – in any case, her sin was well known in the community

Like the Samaritan woman at the well and the woman caught in the act of adultery she had no illusions about her sin

She was accustomed to being shunned – especially by the religiously devout Pharisees

But somehow, like Zacchaeus, she had heard that Jesus is a very different kind of religious teacher

And she risked the embarrassment and humiliation of being summarily thrown out of the Pharisees' home so that she might honor Jesus with a jar of very expensive perfume – even the container of alabaster would have been expensive

Our text says that Jesus was *"reclined at table"* which speaks of the custom of the day of lying on one's left side leaving the right hand free to eat with and having their feet outstretched behind them with their sandals removed

And the sinful woman came to stand behind Jesus and as she stood and wept over her sinfulness, her tears fell upon Jesus' feet so she began to dry them with her hair and kiss them and then she anointed them with the perfume

We aren't told, but it might well be that Jesus had met this woman previously and she may well have come to repentance at that earlier meeting and had her sins forgiven and that this was in response to that earlier meeting

But the simple truth is that her remarkable display of love and devotion came from a heart that was fully aware of her sin and the knowledge that Jesus knew about her sin but still accepted her

What she likely didn't realize but we would do well to recognize is that Jesus didn't behave as he did toward her *in spite of* her sin but *because of* her sin

After all, the reason Jesus came to earth was to seek and to save the lost as he himself stated in **Luke 19:10**

Picture the scene in your mind

This sinful woman bursts into the Pharisee's dinner party uninvited and begins to make this lavish display of grief over her sin mixed with relief over the forgiveness of it and continues weeping, kissing, and anointing Jesus' feet

Try to put yourself in that room and imagine just how awkward things must have gotten in those few minutes

What would you be thinking if you were the host?

Well, we don't have to wonder what the Pharisee thought because his inner dialogue is recorded for us in verse 39 [**Luke 7:39**]

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 of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

Remember, the Pharisees were so committed to moral purity that they strictly avoided intimate, personal contact with anyone who they perceived to be a sinner who might have a corrupting influence on them

So the Pharisee concludes that either Jesus is unaware of the kind of woman who is anointing his feet – in which case he can't possibly be a true prophet from God

Or Jesus knows what kind of person she is and doesn't care – in which case he can't possibly be properly committed to the righteousness that God desires

After all, in the Pharisee's mind, anyone who truly knows God and who is truly pursuing righteousness will know sin when they see it and they would keep themselves apart from overt sinners

If you think about it, the Pharisee's logic is kind of humorous in a sense

Of course Jesus knows about the woman's sin – he knows more about it than the Pharisee or even the woman herself knows

And, as we will see next, he even knows what the Pharisee is thinking

And although the Pharisee doesn't yet recognize it, Jesus is the very definition of righteousness so it's kind of funny that he questions Jesus' commitment to righteousness

Finally, Jesus breaks the silence in verse 40 as he addresses the Pharisee [**Luke 7:40**]

And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

II. How Jesus Responded

Once more we see that Jesus doesn't tackle the issue head on but rather he addresses it obliquely in that he tells the Pharisee, whose name we now learn is Simon, a story about cancelled debts

Two men were indebted to a moneylender – one of them owed a rather large sum and the other owed a much smaller amount

Our text says the one owed 500 denarii and the other owed 50 denarii

Since a denarius was the typical amount a laborer in that day would have earned for a day's labor we see that both debts are significant

One man owes a sum equal to a little less than 1-1/2 year's wages and the other owes just shy of two-month's wages

And our text says that even though one man's debt was 10 times the size of the other man's neither could repay the moneylender – they were both in the same boat even though the amount they owed was so different

So the moneylender cancelled the debt of both men

I don't personally know of any moneylenders who do such a thing outside of a parable but, then again, if you think about it, grace is always audacious

Clearly, Jesus' point is that we are all in the same boat when it comes to the debt of sin that we owe to God

It doesn't matter if we have the righteousness of a Pharisee or if we have the sin burden of the sinful woman

None of us can repay what we owe – if we are to have any hope at all of being reconciled to God, our debt must be forgiven

Look again at **Psalms 49:7** from our Scripture reading this morning which makes clear that no one can make atonement for his or her sins – it's a price too high for any of us

So, in his parable Jesus shows the debt of the two men being cancelled by the person to whom the debts were owed and then he asked the Pharisee which man he supposed would love the moneylender more

In a sense, both men had received equal forgiveness because both men had 100% of their debt cancelled but the Pharisee, and we also, know that the one with the bigger debt would likely be the one who would be most grateful

So that was the answer he gave to Jesus and Jesus told him he had answered correctly

But still, the Pharisee didn't get the point of the parable and what it had to do with what was going on in his own home

So Jesus proceeded to show him the practical outworking of the parable by relating how Simon had treated him when he arrived to be a guest in his home

We all know there are certain customs that are expected when guests show up at our homes

We offer to take their coat and hat if they are wearing them

We offer them the best seat in the house; we ask them if they would like something to drink or to eat

We might offer to show them around the house and we try to do what they want to do and to talk about what they want to talk about

Those kinds of things are just expected of a host in our culture

Likewise in Jesus' day hosts were expected to carry out certain duties toward their guests and Jesus calls Simon out for having been neglectful in those duties

He tells him: you didn't offer me water to wash my feet, you didn't greet me with a kiss, and you didn't anoint my head with oil

Those were all things that would normally have been done for a guest but especially for Jesus had Simon recognized just who it was that he was hosting

And he contrasted Simon's failure to carry out the most basic of social niceties with the lavish treatment of the sinful woman:

She didn't just offer me a basin where I could wash my feet; she washed them with her tears and dried them with her hair

She didn't just give me an obligatory peck on the cheek; she has been continuously kissing my feet

She didn't anoint my head with common oil; she anointed my feet with expensive perfume

Then Jesus summed up the teaching with the statement in verse 47 [**Luke 7:47**]

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.

Now, we need to understand that Jesus was not saying that the woman's sins were forgiven because she did all of those things for Jesus – she did not earn her forgiveness by her actions

Rather, he is saying that because her sins were forgiven; most likely on some prior occasion in private and now publicly, and because she understood the enormity and the gravity of her sins, she demonstrated her profound gratitude through her actions and that those actions were evidence of her forgiveness

And Jesus makes this distinction clear in verse 50 [**Luke 7:50**] where he tells the woman that it was her faith that had saved her – and though it is unspoken, this implies that it was not her works – and he bid her to go in peace

Jesus hoped he could cause Simon to consider his own sinful condition but again we see that Jesus didn't share the clear message of the gospel with Simon

He reassured the sinful woman that she had been forgiven because her actions showed that she clearly understood her need and her gratitude showed that she accepted that Jesus was the payment for her debt

But he had to leave Simon to ponder the possibility that he was not really any different from the woman he looked down on because he also owed a debt to God that he couldn't repay

And in his public forgiveness of the sinful woman Jesus showed who he is and what is required to be forgiven and he challenged Simon to "see" the sinful woman as she really was and, likewise, to see himself as he truly was because both were sinners in need of forgiveness

So what lessons should we take from this account as we seek to evangelize like Jesus?

III. What We Should Learn

We've already seen in previous accounts where Jesus shared the full gospel with some people but was content to leave others with questions to ponder

And we see that again here which tells us we have to approach every person as an individual and share with them as best suits their specific situation

We've also seen, as we do again in this account, how Jesus befriended people who were ostracized by polite society for their sins

But we also see some unique truths that we would do well to make note of and to incorporate into our own lives

Can I get you to indulge me by taking part in a little exercise?

I want each of you to take your note sheet and flip it over to the back side and write down what you consider to be the three worst sins a person can commit – just jot down the three worst sins you can think of

Got it?

Okay, now look at your list and consider whether you listed sins that you have committed or with which you still struggle

Or did you list the sins of other people

Do any of you think that maybe you should change your name to Simon because you have a little Pharisee in you?

I've often said that one of the biggest problems in our world today is a lack of understanding about sin

And, sadly, that's true even in the church because we have a tendency to downplay our own sins while we look down on the sins of others

Part of the reason for that is because we tend to judge ourselves based on our intentions and others on their actions

But it's also because we really don't grasp the seriousness of any and all sin

And we have become Pharisaical in our practices thinking that if we follow a set of self-imposed rules and if we do all the things we think a good Christian ought to do while avoiding all the things a good Christian ought not to do we are fine

But that approach will cause us to love little because we will begin to believe we have actually been forgiven little

And we can come to believe that, while we do indeed need Christ, we just need a little help because we're pretty good folks compared to those "real" sinners out there

And a lack of understanding concerning our own sin can have a negative impact on our witness to others

Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day we can begin to look down on "those sinners" and seek to separate ourselves from their influence so they can't drag us down to their level

But when we have a clear picture of how offensive our sin is to God and how destitute we are when it comes to clearing our accounts with God – then we will be able to come alongside those sinners with understanding and compassion and even the spirit of solidarity found in those who share a common malady and plight

But that can only happen as the weight of our own sin drives us to our knees before God and makes us aware of our total dependence on the sacrifice of our Lord, Jesus

Because, when we stop comparing ourselves to other people and begin to compare ourselves to the perfect righteousness of God we will stop grading people on the severity of their sin and see that all sin is equally vile to God

Then we can begin to look at others with eyes of understanding that allow us to show them that we are only fellow travelers who understand our own sin and our own need for the Savior

And that we know the way to receive God's unmerited mercy and grace only because we have likewise been shown and accepted it for ourselves

Conclusion

When we considered the account of the rich, young ruler I said that people who exhibit the characteristics of goodness and morality can be the most difficult people to witness to because they fail to see their need of the Savior

That is especially true when they can look around and see how much better they are than those around them

Sometimes, all we can do for a person like that is show them God's Law so they can have a chance to compare themselves against it and discover just how bankrupt they truly are

That's what Jesus did for the rich, young ruler and it's what he did for Simon the Pharisee – two outwardly moral people who needed to come to grips with reality before they could be ready to accept salvation

You will run into people like that as you try to share Christ – you probably know someone that fits that description now

They need to be shown the Law and how far short of fulfilling it they are in spite of their relative goodness

But before we can show them the Law we need to come to grips with our own failure to achieve God's perfect standard

Because when we become confident of our own goodness and our own zealousness and our own industry when it comes to serving God we can become proud and begin to presume on God's grace for ourselves and to look down on others

I fear there are many in churches today that are content to live in a holy huddle with their church crowd while keeping the "sinners" at bay and thinking that they are doing well when they disparage the lost for their behavior

But Jesus came to seek and to save the lost and to be the Friend of sinners and that is what he's commissioned us to do as we continue the ministry he began

And if we want to do that we must have the same compassion and love for the lost that Jesus had

But, as our text makes clear, those who believe they have been saved from little actually have a smaller capacity for love and compassion both toward the Lord and the lost and it will come through as they attempt to share the gospel

Therefore, we will do our best job in evangelizing the lost only when we clearly understand our own depravity and our accountability to God

Because only then can we fully appreciate the Lord's provision on the cross that forgives our debt that we could never repay and effectively share that reality with our fellow debtors

Let's pray