

# Gratitude in Action

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Luke 7:36–50  
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Last week, we saw that the Bible commands us to give thanks. It also gives us two reasons to do this: God is good, i.e., he's intrinsically everything he needs to be as God, and he manifests his goodness to us as everlasting mercy. We need his mercy because our sins are great.

But how should we give thanks to the Lord? It should include a verbal declaration of God's goodness and mercy. Not only does God command us to proclaim his goodness, but doing so is also an encouragement to our fellow believers and a witness to unbelievers. God uses our words to glorify himself.

Yet, words aren't enough. The third part of our catechism also reminds us to express our gratitude in how we live, particularly in how we keep his commandments and reach out to him in prayer. Today, we want to look at gratitude in action.

Other than Jesus, who's always the main character of Scripture, two other individuals stand out in this morning's text. One is a Pharisee, who invited the Lord to his home for dinner. The gospel of Luke presents Pharisees a little more favorably than the other gospels. It tells us about another Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner in chapter 11, a group of Pharisees who warned Jesus of Herod in chapter 13, and *one of the chief Pharisees* who also invited Jesus to dinner in chapter 14. The other person in our text is a woman, whom Luke described only as a sinner. We know very little about her besides what she did on this occasion.

Today, we want to compare and contrast these two individuals and their responses to Jesus regarding gratitude.

## The Pharisee

Let's talk about the Pharisee first. Although Luke was more positive about the Pharisees than the other gospel writers, he wasn't a big fan of them. Most of what he wrote about them is very negative. He often told how they tempted Jesus. And even when they invited him to dinner, it wasn't necessarily with good intentions. In chapter 11, Jesus denounced the Pharisees. He said, *Woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye love the uppermost seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that*

*walk over them are not aware of them* (vv. 43–44). And in chapter 18, he made an unfavorable comparison between a self-righteous Pharisee and a tax collector, both of whom had gone into the temple to pray. The humble tax collector was justified; the Pharisee wasn't.

So, the fact that the Pharisee in today's text, a man named Simon according to verse 40, invited Jesus to dinner could be either good or bad. In this case, I tend to think it was probably good. Why? Partly because there's nothing in our text to suggest that Simon arranged this dinner party to trap Jesus, and partly because Jesus didn't condemn Simon as he often did other Pharisees. Instead, he used the situation that presented itself at Simon's dinner party to teach him. He showed him a better way.

Simon's invitation for Jesus to come to dinner was probably sincere. There was something about Jesus that caught his attention. But whatever he saw wasn't enough. We know this because, after the woman washed the Lord's feet, he said, *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* (v. 39). Maybe Simon considered Jesus to be a good teacher or a mighty worker of miracles, but that's about as far as he could go. He couldn't acknowledge that Jesus was a prophet, much less the Messiah or the incarnate second person of the Trinity.

Here's what I'm suggesting: the fact that Simon invited Jesus to dinner was itself an expression of gratitude, but it was a small expression of gratitude because Simon's understanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do was microscopic.

The parable Jesus gave Simon in verses 41 and 42 confirms this. Two debtors owed money to the same creditor, who eventually forgave both their debts. One debtor owed fifty denarii (or approximately two months' income). The other owed ten times as much (approximately a year and a half's wages). But Jesus didn't ask Simon, "Which debtor loved the creditor and which one hated him?" but, "Which of them loved him more?" The assumption is that both debtors loved him some because of what he had done for them.

Simon answered Jesus' question correctly: the one who was forgiven more will also love more. Then Jesus turned to the woman while still talking to Simon and explained what Simon missed. He exposed Simon's thoughts to show that he was a prophet after all. He spoke of Simon's small gratitude. He invited Jesus to dinner, but he failed to do anything more. He didn't offer Jesus any of the common courtesies of the day, like washing his feet or greeting him with a kiss on the cheek. His willful neglect of these customs shows he didn't see himself as a debtor. He didn't believe Jesus had anything on him. Jesus might be able to help him some but only because he wasn't too bad to start with.

In the end, Simon’s problem boiled down to just one question: what he thought of Jesus. He couldn’t be thankful to him as long as he considered himself Jesus’ equal or superior. He didn’t believe that Jesus deserved any special recognition beyond what he had already given him. He had no debt. Instead, he should have responded like David in Psalm 143 and pleaded, *Enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified* (v. 2).

## The Sinner Woman

Now, let’s consider the woman in the story. She’s quite a puzzling character in a lot of ways, although it seems the people in town knew her very well. We don’t know her name. Some have identified her as Mary Magdalene, and others claim she was Mary of Bethany. But there’s little to support either of these opinions. Nor do we know the nature of her sin, though many have insisted that she must have been a harlot. The only thing we know for certain is that she understood the gravity of her sin, whatever it might have been, and knew that Jesus had forgiven it.

Another thing stands out about her. There’s nothing in Luke’s account that suggests Simon invited her into his house. Rather, it sounds like he left his door open for anyone to come in, probably because he wanted to showcase his generosity, and this woman simply took advantage of his open door.

What does this tell us about her? It shows that her sense of gratitude was so great that she didn’t mind crashing someone else’s dinner party and, in a sense, showing up the host. She was so thankful to Jesus that she had to show it, even if it meant violating customary rules of etiquette.

The woman’s eagerness to show her gratitude should be a lesson for us. It shows us that thankfulness to the Lord should be one of our highest priorities. But is it? Does our thankfulness pour out in unexpected ways, or do others have to drag it out of us?

But please don’t confuse the sinner-woman’s eagerness with arrogance. She was anything but arrogant. Look how Luke described her appearance before Jesus in verses 37 and 38. He says that a woman (without a name and having no special recognition), who also was a notorious sinner in the community (no offense is identified), approached Jesus, but not from the front. She wasn’t worthy of that. Instead, she stood behind him. She must have been bent over because Luke specifically says that she *stood at his feet*. And she was weeping. Luther called her tears “heart water” because the weight of her sin had broken her heart, and the great mercy of Jesus filled her with unspeakable joy.

And look at what she did! She washed the Lord’s feet — something a servant would ordinarily do. But she didn’t use a pail and water. She washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. By uncovering her head in this way, she made herself liable to a charge that

could have led to divorce in the first century, but that didn't matter to her. She then kissed the Lord's feet, confessing her absolute love and submission to him. And finally, she anointed his feet with the alabaster ointment that she brought in a box.

The ointment in this story is critical for understanding what this woman was doing. Alabaster oil was extremely valuable. Even a small flask of it would have cost about three hundred denarii (or a year's wages). And since it's unlikely that this woman was independently wealthy, the ointment was probably everything she had. Like the widow who gave her last mite to the temple, she gave out of her extreme poverty. She turned it all over to the Lord because the Lord had forgiven her of so much and welcomed her into the family of God.

With this background, look again at Jesus' parable. Why was this woman so moved to express her love and gratitude in such an amazing way? It's because she knew she had been forgiven much. She owed a debt to the Lord she could never repay, but Jesus forgave it all.

The woman probably didn't know or understand exactly how all of this worked. Jesus hadn't yet offered himself on the cross for our sins. But she knew the Lord would take care of her sins. Unlike Simon, she didn't flatter Jesus with dinner and then take it all back by questioning whether he was a prophet. She didn't give him feigned praise. She just cast herself on his mercy and trusted him to be a forgiving creditor.

We find the same attitude in the psalmist in Psalm 86. Two verses stand out here. Verse 5 says, *For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.* Then verse 15 adds, *But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.* Note: not just merciful, but plenteous in mercy. This is our Savior. The woman in our text understood this. She had the real blessedness of having her sins forgiven. Psalm 32 says, *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile* (vv. 1–2).

This woman loved Jesus much and was eager to show her gratitude. Simon didn't know what she was doing or why. Why didn't he? Because he and all the self-righteous people of the world don't believe they owe God anything. Rather, God owes them. He owes them life and happiness and prosperity. He owes them love and favor, regardless of how much they sin against him. In fact, as they see it, God exists solely to do nice things for them.

The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with the most expensive gift she had shows how wrong the world is. The Lord doesn't owe us anything. We owe him everything. And how much we recognize this debt and cry out for mercy shows how grateful we are.

The fact that Jesus forgave this sinful woman's awful sins seems to have irritated Simon's other guests so much that they questioned his right to forgive sins at all. They said within themselves, i.e., they were thinking, *Who is this that forgiveth sins also?* Some of them may have been Pharisees who shared Simon's attitude. If not, they still held to a Pharisee's perspective, believing that God owed them something.

Jesus told the woman that her sins had been forgiven not just to comfort her but also to warn everyone present not to look down on God's mercy to repentant sinners. His grace is far more powerful than any one person's sins or even all men's sins put together.

Then Jesus added another word of comfort for her. He said, *Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.* Of course, it wasn't her faith as such that saved her. No one's faith merits God's favor or deserves his blessing because our faith is never what it should be. It's a gift from God. But Jesus credited this woman's salvation to her faith because she put her faith in him as the only Savior of sinners. She knew Jesus had forgiven her. The object of her faith made all the difference.

It's always true that the Lord blesses us for the sake of the gifts he gives us. This should make us even more thankful because it showcases the greatness of God's generosity. Over and over, he shows himself to be more generous than we thought possible. Moses wrote, *And the LORD thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thine hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good: for the LORD will again rejoice over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers (Deut. 30:9).*

So, which of the two people in our text are you? Are you a Simon, willing to go so far but no farther? Or are you like the woman, whose gratitude to Jesus spilled over abundantly because she understood the greatness of his mercy to her? Amen.