

## **“Jesus Saves a Sinful Woman”**

### **Luke 7:36-50**

In II Samuel 12 we read how God sent the prophet Nathan to king David to tell him a story that outraged his natural judgment. When king David heard the story and was outraged at the unjust actions of the man in the story he said to Nathan, “As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die.” (II Samuel 12:5)

And then the prophet Nathan said to David, “Thou art the man.” (II Samuel 12:7)

Jesus did something very similar in our text this morning. Jesus used a simple illustration that appealed to the natural judgment of this man named Simon. And when Simon had passed judgment, Jesus turned this illustration like a mirror to reflect the visage of the inner man to those who were present on this occasion.

And though it has been 2000 years, the force of the illustration is not diminished. Just as Jesus’ words brought conviction and comfort to those present when they were spoken, they bring conviction and comfort to us. As we look at this passage, may each one of us carefully consider what is revealed here about our own hearts.

## **I. Setting**

First, consider the people involved in this account. The central figure in this account is Jesus. This is an account of events in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus was invited to this meal. Jesus attended the meal. Jesus was ministered to by this woman. Jesus gave a parable. And then Jesus applied the truth taught in the parable.

I want to draw your attention to two questions or doubts that were raised concerning Jesus in this account. The first is found in the middle of verse 39: “If he were a prophet.” Who is Jesus? Is he a prophet? Does he have the information a prophet should have? Does he act like a prophet? In this text we see doubt about Jesus’ legitimacy as a prophet.

The second question is found down in verse 49, “Who is this that forgiveth sins also?” Jesus had just announced something shocking. He had said to a notably sinful woman, maybe even a notoriously sinful woman, that her sins were forgiven. And that action led to this question about Jesus: “Who is this that forgiveth sins?” As we go through this text we will look for answers to these doubts and questions about Jesus.

The next key figure in this account is Simon the Pharisee. We are introduced to him in verse 36 as “one of the Pharisees.” We are given his name in verse 40: “Simon.” What do we know about this man?

First, he was a Pharisee. He was part of this strict, conservative, zealous sect of Jews. We talked about the Pharisees last week. They were separated from the common Jewish people by manner of life. They were interested in a formal keeping of the law, they became proud and self-righteous. They were more concerned about their appearance before men than their righteousness before God. And because of this they were often strongly rebuked by Jesus. We saw one of those strong rebukes last week, in verses 31-35.

We also know that Simon was a man of some wealth. He invited Jesus to a meal, which appears to have been some sort of banquet. This would have been fairly expensive and would not be something that a person of normal means would regularly do. Also, this meal was held at Simon's house as we are told in v. 36. So we know Simon must have been a man of at least moderate wealth to host the meal described in this text.

Simon had doubts about Jesus. Remember, Simon is a Pharisee. Although this is relatively early on in Jesus' ministry, there is already strong disagreement between the Pharisees as a whole and Jesus. Again, we saw the rebuke Jesus delivered to the Pharisees immediately before this text, in verses 31-35. Yet Simon invited Jesus to his home for a meal. Why? Scripture does not tell us his motivation.

But we know he was not a believer. And we know this because of the doubts he expressed to himself in verse 39, "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.” Simon didn’t believe that Jesus was a prophet, much less the Messiah.

Finally, we are told that Simon was not very hospitable to Jesus. Again, this is strange. Simon invited Jesus to eat a meal at his house but he does not show him many of the common courtesies of that culture as Jesus listed in verses 44-46.

Jesus attributed this lack of hospitality to a lack of love.

The final key figure in this text is the sinful woman. We are first introduced to her in verse 37 where we read, “a woman in the city, which was a sinner.” We are given very little information about her. There are many similarities between this account and other accounts in the gospels of times when Jesus was anointed by a woman at a feast. But there are also key differences which indicate that this was a separate occasion and not a parallel account.<sup>1</sup> There are differences in the location, the time, and the people involved. This is not a parallel account. As far as we know, this is the only time this woman is mentioned in Scripture and all we are told is that she was a sinner.

Scripture does not give us the name of this woman or the nature of her sin, but key to this account is the fact that she was a sinner. People have speculated that she had been a prostitute. That is possible. Her sin was, to some degree, public.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed explanation of the differences in these accounts I would recommend John Gill’s commentary on this passage.

Other people, such as Simon, knew her as a sinner. But Scripture does not specifically tell us about her sin.

We know this woman was a believer because in verse 50 Jesus told her, “Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” We are also told that she was hospitable to Jesus in all the ways where His host Simon had not been hospitable. And Jesus attributed this hospitality to an abundance of love.

Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and the sinful woman are the three main people involved in this account. Now let’s look at the events that led to the teaching portion of this text. Verse 36 tells us that Simon the Pharisee wanted Jesus to come and eat at his house, and Jesus honored this request and went to his house for a meal.

Verse 37 tells us the sinful woman knew Jesus was at Simon’s house and went there with an alabaster box of ointment. That brings us to verse 38, “And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.”

To understand this verse it is helpful to know something about the customs of meals in first-century Israel. They did not eat at tables like you and I would be familiar with. The food would be spread on a very low table and the guests would recline around the table, with their heads toward the middle and their feet out, away from the table. Also, it would not be uncommon for people who were not part

of the meal itself to be present to observe and listen and learn as leaders met and discussed important issues over a meal. So in verse 38 when this woman approached Jesus and began to weep over and anoint his feet, it was somewhat in the background and though it may appear strange to us, it would not have been overly disruptive to the meal itself. Unusual? Certainly. But maybe not as shocking as it appears to us as first glance.

And we see this in verse 39. When Simon the Pharisee saw this, he responded to it internally. He did not say anything aloud. He did not shoo this woman away. He did not call for servants to take her out of his house. But he did have an internal response to this scene. He said to himself in verse 39, “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.”

This tells us something about Simon. He may have been undecided about Jesus, but this seems to settle it for him. In his mind Jesus cannot be a prophet because if he were a prophet he would know that this woman was a sinner.

Notice what Simon does not say. He doesn't say “If Jesus knew what sort of woman she was, he would stop her. Or He wouldn't have let her begin in the first place.”

He simply thinks that Jesus doesn't know that this woman is a sinner. His assumption was that if Jesus knew what sort of woman she was he would rebuke

her and not allow her to touch him or have anything to do with him because she was a sinner.

Simon's mistake lay in not considering the ministry Jesus came to accomplish. He was considering Jesus as merely a prophet, and not as the Messiah. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. (Luke 19:10) Jesus wasn't unaware of this woman's sin. Rather, He came to save sinners. And thus, He did not reject sinners who came to him in faith and repentance. Because Simon had too narrow a view of Jesus' ministry, he not only rejected Jesus as a prophet, but also as the Messiah.

There is a warning here for all of us. Beware of subjecting Jesus Christ to your judgment. He is not a specimen to be examined. He is not a list of pros and cons to be weighed against each other and compared and then ultimately accepted or rejected on their merit. He is God, and he is to be obeyed.

Simon had a standard by which he judged Jesus. And he was wildly wrong. His standard was wrong, his conclusion about Jesus was wrong, and even his judgment of his own standard was wrong as we will see later on in this text.

We have looked at the characters: Jesus, Simon, and this woman. We have seen the setting: Jesus was eating a meal at Simon's house and this woman came and wept over and anointed Jesus' feet. And then we saw how Simon responded. Now we will look at what Jesus taught on this occasion, and Jesus began with an illustration.

## II. Illustration

In verse 40 Jesus said, “Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee.”

And look at how Simon replied: “Master, say on.”

Internally he rejected Jesus. He just thought: “Jesus cannot be a prophet.”

But with his mouth he gave deference to our Lord by using this title for respect:

“Master,” or “Teacher.” There are many people who honor the Lord with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him. (Isaiah 29:13) Simon replied, “Master, say on.”

Jesus gave his illustration or parable in verses 41 and 42. This is a very simple story of a creditor and two debtors. Both of these debtors have a significant debt. One owes 500 “pence” and the other owes 50 “pence.” The word that is translated as “pence” here is the word for a Roman denarius, which was a silver coin worth about 1 day’s wages for a laborer. So one man would have to work 50 days to earn enough money to pay back his loan. The other man would have to work 500 days to pay back his loan. Both of these are significant debts, but one man owes ten times more.

This word “creditor” is not the normal word used in the New Testament for a moneychanger or banker. It is more akin to “loanshark” or “extortioner” in our modern language. This was someone who charged very high interest on unsecured personal loans.

Imagine if you owed several thousand dollars to a loanshark. That would be some pressure. That would be uncomfortable. But now imagine you owed tens of



thousands of dollars to a loanshark. That would probably keep you up at night. That would be a dangerous position.

And both of the debtors in Jesus illustration are destitute. They have nothing. They have no ability to pay their debts. The loan has been called and they are broke.

But the creditor generously, kindly, mercifully forgave them both. He came for his money and they both said, "I don't have it." According to the laws of the time, he could have had them thrown into prison. Depending on the terms of the loan, he may have even been able to sell them as slaves to recover his money. But instead, he forgave their debt.

He said, "Don't worry about it. It is forgiven. You don't owe me anything." He crossed out their names in his ledger. All their debt was immediately gone. He bore the loss. They were forgiven. That is the illustration Jesus gave.

Then at the end of verse 42 Jesus asked Simon a question: "Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?" Out of these two debtors, who will be the most thankful to the creditor? The one who was forgiven of relatively little? Or the one who was forgiven much?

What is the answer? This is not a trick question. There is not some hidden meaning in this illustration. Obviously, the one who was forgiven the vast sum will be more thankful. That's the point Jesus was driving at with this illustration.

Now look at the answer Simon gave in verse 43. “Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.” This is a very tentative answer from Simon. He said, “I suppose.” What do you mean, you suppose? Unless the man with a great debt was a completely ungrateful wretch, he would be more thankful, for he had a far greater debt forgiven.

Our natural sense of justice tells us this. We don’t need special, divine revelation to know this is true. That’s important for this text because Jesus is going to use Simon’s own judgment on this matter to judge Simon’s reception of Jesus. Simon the Pharisee was not a believer, but even in his natural judgment he could get this right.

And that’s what Jesus said at the end of verse 43, “Thou hast rightly judged.” You are right Simon. The man who was forgiven more will love more. Jesus used this very simple illustration to make application to both Simon and this sinful woman and to further reveal himself and his ministry.

### **III. Application**

Verse 44 tells us that Jesus turned to the woman. And remember, as they were reclined around this table, to turn to the woman Jesus would have had to turn away from Simon. But he was still talking to Simon.

And look at what Jesus said in verses 44-46. Jesus compared the hospitality of Simon to the hospitality of this woman. First, the washing of his feet. Simon had

not provided water for Jesus to wash his feet. This was a common courtesy of the time. We see many examples of this practice in narrative passages in the Bible.

Simon made no provision for Jesus to wash his feet, but this woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Not only did she make provision for washing Jesus feet. She actually did it herself. If someone else was going to do this task, it was usually reserved for the lowest of servants. It was seen as a humiliating and humbling task: to wash someone else's feet. But that is what this woman does.

Second, a kiss of greeting. Simon did not kiss Jesus as was the customary greeting of peace in that culture. This would be similar to someone not shaking your hand in our culture. Have you ever had someone avoid shaking your hand, or refuse to shake your hand? It is off-putting. It can even be insulting depending on the circumstance. That's what Simon had done to Jesus.

But this woman had kissed Jesus feet. Jesus said, "Since the time I came in [she] hath not ceased to kiss my feet." There was this ongoing display of affection, reception, and humility.

And finally, an anointing of oil. It was not uncommon for hosts to supply oil for guests to anoint themselves with. Although this was not always a part of a feast like this, it was a mark of honor and respect.<sup>2</sup> And Simon had not anointed Jesus' head when Jesus came into his house. Not even with common oil.

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<sup>2</sup> Some Biblical texts that could illustrate this are Psalm 23 and Ecclesiastes 9.

But this woman had anointed Jesus feet. And she did not use common oil, but rather ointment. The word here comes from the word for myrrh. This was a fragrant ointment, nearer to perfume. Far more precious than common oil. At every point where Simon had failed as a host this woman had shown the greatest deference, courtesy, and love toward Jesus.

And from this woman's display, Jesus drew a conclusion in verse 47. Jesus was still speaking to Simon. Look at what Jesus said, "Her sins, which are many." Remember, Simon knew that this woman was a sinner. He had been thinking about this woman, and how terrible of a sinner she was. But nothing had been said about her sin. And remember, back in v. 39 Simon had thought that if Jesus were really a prophet he would know that this woman was a sinner. Here in verse 47 Jesus met that standard of proof. Simon had the wrong standard, he came to the wrong conclusion, and even his judgment based on his own standard was wrong. Jesus knew about this woman's sins. He knew that her sins were many. But Jesus said, "They are forgiven."

And Jesus gave his reason for saying this, "For she loved much." Pay careful attention to what Jesus taught here. Jesus did not say that this woman was forgiven because she loved much. But rather, she loved much because she was forgiven. Remember the illustration Jesus just gave: the debtor who was forgiven much loved much. This woman, because she was forgiven much loved much. The love she showed toward Jesus demonstrated that she had been forgiven.

Then Jesus spoke directly to the woman. In verse 48 Jesus said to her, “Thy sins are forgiven.” This is a public declaration of something that has already happened. This woman was bearing the fruit of faith, the fruit of genuine repentance and forgiveness. The love she demonstrated toward Jesus was evidence that she had been forgiven. And then Jesus publicly declared it.

We are not told how the woman responded to Jesus’ words, but verse 49 does tell us about the response of others who were present at this meal. “Who is this?” Who does Jesus think he is? What does he mean, saying her sins are forgiven? Only God can forgive sins. This is the same thing the scribes and Pharisees said in Luke 5:21 when Jesus forgave the sins of the man with palsy. Simon the Pharisee had doubted Jesus because he thought Jesus didn’t know this woman was a sinner. These people doubted Jesus because they didn’t think he had the authority to declare that her sins were forgiven.

Just as Jesus had known what was in the heart of Simon, he certainly knew what these people were thinking. But Jesus did not address them. Rather, He continued speaking to the woman and in verse 50 he said, “Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.” If there was any question about how this woman was saved, Jesus clarifies it in this verse. He told her, “Thy faith hath saved thee.”

Jesus confirmed to this woman that she was forgiven. Let Simon the Pharisee think what he will. Let the others who were present at this feast murmur and grumble within themselves as they wonder at Christ’s authority to forgive sins.

None of those things matter to this woman because Jesus said to her: “Thy faith hath saved thee.” Saved She was now a child of God. Though despised and doubted and rejected by men, she was forgiven by Jesus. Far better to have God’s forgiveness than man’s approval. Jesus confirmed to this woman that she was forgiven.

Jesus commended her faith. What was it that saved her? Jesus said it was her faith. And what was the object of her faith? We see clearly from this passage that the object of her faith was Jesus. She had sought Him out and came to Him with tears and humility. God’s great forgiveness led to this woman’s great love for Jesus. In her great love for him she had ministered to Him. She worshipped him. That’s what’s really going on in this passage. Simon and his other guests, even Jesus, had gathered for a meal. But this woman, motivated by her love for Jesus, came to worship. And that’s what she did. In this passage we see this chain of faith, forgiveness, love, and worship. They are all linked together and one leads to the next. True faith will always lead to true worship, to glorifying God. God exalts and honors faith because faith leads us to exalt and honor God. Jesus commended this woman’s faith.

And finally Jesus comforted this woman. He told her, “Go in peace.” This woman had only know bondage and guilt in her sin, but now she was comforted with peace from her Savior. She no longer needed to be disturbed by her past sins, for they were forgiven. She no longer needed to to be disturbed by the reproaches

and rejection of others, for God had accepted her, forgiven her, and promised her peace. She could go and live whatever life God put before her, faithfully serving God in it, and then when her life on earth was done she could pass into eternal peace. Jesus comforted this woman: “Go in peace.”

I titled this sermon, “Jesus Saves a Sinful Woman.” In this passage the power of God and the grace of God are revealed in the salvation of this sinful woman. As we conclude, I want us to look back to verse 47.

In the first half of that verse Jesus said to Simon, “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much.” And we have already studied that portion of this verse.

But now look at the rest of the verse, “But to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.” As we make application from this text to ourselves we must ask three questions.

First: “Do I love Jesus?”

Maybe your honest answer this morning is: “No. I do not love Jesus.” Maybe you are like Simon in this text: unconverted, unbelieving, and unloving. You have never seen yourself as a sinner. You have never seen your need for a savior. Why would you love, truly love Jesus? You have no need for Jesus.

If you have no true love for Jesus is is a clear indication that you are unconverted. And I will tell you the same thing Jesus preached during his earthly ministry: “Repent ye and believe the gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

The second question we need to ask as we make application to ourselves is:  
“Do I love Jesus as much as I should?”

Shake your head no with me. You don't love Jesus as much as you should. I don't love Jesus as much as I should. We come woefully short.

And this leads to the third and final question: “How can I love Jesus more? How can I grow in my love of Jesus?”

Look again at the words of Jesus in verse 47, “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.” This woman's love for Jesus was a fruit of her faith, springing up out of the forgiveness she had received from God. Her great sins had been forgiven and this led to her great love for Jesus. And so it is for you and I.

Do you want to grow in your love of Jesus? Grow in your knowledge of Him. Grow in your understanding of God's perfect holiness, and justice, and righteousness as Scripture reveals Him. Grow in your understanding of man as Scripture reveals our nature. See your sin as God sees it: as an affront to His holiness, as betrayal, as treason. The more we grow in a Biblical view of God's holiness and our own sin, the more we will understand how much we have been forgiven, and the more we will love and worship our Savior.