



Jesus, a Pharisee and a Sinful Woman

Luke 7:36-50

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This passage is about two different ways of relating to Jesus Christ. One of the great concerns of the gospels has to do with how people respond to Jesus. The message of the gospels and indeed of the Bible as a whole is that how we respond to Jesus is a matter of life and death, heaven or hell. Jesus is presented in the gospels and in the New Testament as a person we may not ignore. As we read in John 3:36 “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” This being the case, the gospels give quite a bit of attention to this whole matter of the right and the wrong way to respond to Jesus. Since Jesus is God and since we are all required to love and worship God, the question of how we treat Jesus and how we relate to him is one of utmost importance for our wellbeing in this life and for the life to come.

That passage that we will focus on this evening tells of a dinner invitation that Jesus received from a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a group among the Jews of Jesus’ day who were very serious about keeping the law of God. In the Bible that is usually a good thing, but the Pharisees are mostly presented negatively in the gospels. The Pharisees demonstrate that it is possible to be serious about keeping the law of God and still not be living in a way that is pleasing to God. We will have to examine more closely why that is as we consider the Pharisee in this story who invited Jesus to a meal. Verse 36 sets the scene. “One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table.”

The fact that this Pharisee, whose name was Simon, asked Jesus to eat with him is interesting because the Pharisees generally were not fond of

Jesus and it is not likely that Jesus got a lot of dinner invitations from them. So this Simon was not as antagonist to Jesus as many of the other Pharisees. The story will reveal that his attitude towards Jesus was still very wrong, but he was at least willing to share a meal with Jesus. The text does not say what his motives were. And so we must be content, not to know. He had enough interest in Jesus to invite him for dinner.

We are, however, given some insight into his spiritual condition by his response to the sinful woman who is the other main character in the story. She is described in verses 37-38: "And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he [Jesus] 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." We will consider her role in the story in a moment, but for now we notice how her presence and her behaviour exposed something about the heart of this Pharisee. Verse 39 says, "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.'"

It is interesting that Luke somehow knew what this man was thinking. But that is not such a mystery because clearly Jesus did know what the man was thinking, and he may well have told this to his disciples when they later discussed this incident. The thoughts of the Pharisee reveal important insights into his spiritual condition. First he is evaluating Jesus. "If this man were a prophet he would have known who and what sort of woman this is..." In the mind of this Pharisee Jesus has failed a test of being a true prophet. He is placing himself above Jesus and evaluating him and Jesus is found wanting. So there is a profound lack of understanding of who Jesus is and there is a profound lack of acknowledgement of Jesus' status as a divinely sent prophet. We would not expect the Pharisee to understand the fullness of Jesus' glory as the Son of God, but Jesus, by his teaching and by his miracles and by the authority with which he spoke had revealed enough of who he was for the Pharisee to know that this was not a man to feel superior to, but rather he was one to submit to and to follow. At the very least Jesus had demonstrated that he was very special and that he was an authentic

prophet of God. Compare Simon's attitude here towards Jesus with that of the centurion of whom we read in the first 10 verses of Luke 7. We considered that passage a few weeks ago.

That centurion, a Roman soldier had shown great respect for Jesus and a remarkable insight into Jesus' authority. He had asked Jesus to heal his servant. But he had done that through intermediaries and he had said, "Lord ... I am not worthy to have you come under my roof But say the word, and let my servant be healed." The centurion looked up to Jesus with great respect and faith. Simon, the Pharisee looked down upon Jesus, critical of him because it did not appear that Jesus knew what kind of woman this was who was touching him.

This is a striking example of how not to relate to Jesus. We do not stand above Jesus and evaluate him. He stands above us and evaluates us. Jesus' credentials are clear from his miracles and from his teaching and from his innate authority. And we are required to humble ourselves before him and acknowledge him for who he is. Listen to how Jesus expresses himself a little further on in Matthew's gospel. Matthew 9:23&26, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.... For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." We do not stand above Jesus to test him. He stands over us in majesty and authority and calls us to follow him and acknowledge him for who he is. Clearly Simon the Pharisee was a long way from that.

But there is something else from Simon's thought recorded in our text that is very revealing. It is his attitude towards the woman. He felt that Jesus should not have allowed that woman to touch him because she was a sinner. Luke does not tell us what kind of sinner this woman was. He just identifies her as a sinner. But what is significant in the thought of Simon the Pharisee is that he looked down upon her because she was a sinner. He would not have allowed her to touch him the way that Jesus allowed the woman to anoint his feet. His thought conveys disdain for the sinful woman. And a sense of superiority. Simon did not only place himself above Jesus giving himself the right to evaluate him, he also

placed himself above this woman, clearly considering himself to be morally superior to her.

And that is very revealing. The text is presenting Simon the Pharisee as a negative example. And a big part of what was wrong about Simon's spiritual condition and thus his way of relating to Jesus is revealed by his attitude towards this sinful woman. He felt morally superior to her. He looked down on her. What God is teaching us here is that how we think about people we consider to be sinners reveals something about our self-perception. Particularly if we look down upon and despise people we consider to be sinners, we are showing that we think of ourselves as morally superior to them. And in the light of this passage it is clear that that is not a good thing.

Now no doubt Simon had not sinned in the same way that the woman had sinned. No doubt he had lived a respectable life, while the woman clearly had not. If we would compare the two in terms of outward respectability, Simon would come out on top. But this passage is reflecting negatively on Simon the Pharisee as the gospels do on the Pharisees in general. And one of the great problems with the Pharisees was what is known as self-righteousness. Luke expresses this clearly in his introduction to Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9. "He [Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt...."

This describes Simon the Pharisee exactly. His whole attitude toward the sinful woman showed that he was "trusting in [himself] that [he was] righteous." And it is important that we probe a little into the psychology of self-righteousness because this is a temptation for religious people who take their religion seriously. We will look at two characteristics of self-righteousness that Jesus points out in his extended condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23. First Jesus teaches that the Pharisees were very strict about less weighty matters of God's law and neglected weightier matters of God's law. In Matthew 23:23 Jesus says to the Pharisees, "For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness."

This is what self-righteousness people do. They are very scrupulous about some parts of God's law while neglecting what Jesus calls the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness. We can assume that Simon the Pharisee was meticulous about things like tithing and Sabbath. But clearly he was lacking in mercy and compassion and humility.

The second characteristic of self-righteousness that I will mention from Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees is the focus on externals of religious while neglecting the inner life – the heart. Jesus says in Matthew 23:28 to the Pharisees, "So you outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." Self-righteousness tends to focus on the externals while being blind to matters of the heart. And we can see that in Simon in our text, in the peek that Luke gives us of his inner thoughts. He was lacking in love towards the sinful women.

Self-righteousness is something that we must be aware of. It is a deadly disease of many people who take their religion seriously. Outwardly strict; inwardly proud and unloving. And this passage shows us that how we relate to sinners like the sinful woman in this story is revealing in terms of self-righteousness. Despising sinners and feeling superior to them is a sign of self-righteousness.

Now let's look at the sinful woman. She is held up as the example in this story. The story is saying that we should be like the woman and not like Simon. And what is highlighted in the story is the way that she treats Jesus. She is passionate about expressing her love for Jesus. There is the fact that she came into the house in the first place. Obviously she is not an invited guest. Clearly from Simon's attitude towards her, she was not welcome in Simon's house. And no doubt she knew that. She would have known what the Pharisees thought of sinful women. And yet she braves the contempt because of the strength of her desire to express her love for Jesus.

She shows the greatness of her love by anointing his feet with very expensive ointment. Her expression of love for Jesus was costly. It was a significant sacrifice. The fact that the ointment was contained in an

alabaster flask suggests that it was expensive. She is motivated to express her love to Jesus in a way that was sacrificial on her part.

And she is clearly deeply moved emotionally. She is weeping. From the rest of the story we understand she was weeping because of the combination of her knowledge of her own sinfulness and Jesus' mercy towards her as a sinner. The woman had some knowledge of Jesus and his message. The story does not tell us the nature of any previous contact between Jesus and the woman, but the story requires that the woman had some prior knowledge of Jesus that inspired her to this act of love and thanksgiving. It is not necessary that Jesus had ever spoken to her before. Perhaps she had only heard his message and perceived in his actions and attitude his compassion for sinners. The story makes it clear that she understood that she was a great sinner and that Jesus was not at all like Simon in his attitude towards sinners.

Indeed the fact that Jesus allowed the woman to do what she did was an expression of his compassionate and welcoming attitude towards people who know themselves to be sinners. There is a striking contrast between Jesus and the Pharisee in their attitude towards the woman. The Pharisee despises her because she is a sinner. Jesus accepts the expressions of love from the woman. And clearly the woman is deeply moved by Jesus and his attitude towards sinners.

And then there is the fact that she wiped, kissed and anointed his feet. The washing and anointing of feet was a practice in that culture. The kissing of feet was not common though there are a few examples of it in the literature to a rabbi who was greatly respected. These actions on the part of the woman expressed humility on her part and great respect and reverence for Jesus.

So we have a very different attitude towards Jesus and a very different concept of self than that of Simon the Pharisee. And this sinful woman is being held up as an example of the way that we should relate to Jesus. The woman is a picture of great love for Jesus. She is a picture of a deep emotional response to Jesus' attitude towards her as a sinner. She is a picture of treating Jesus with respect and reverence. And the story is saying to all who read it, this is the proper way to relate to Jesus. This is the proper way to treat Jesus. Simon the Pharisee is an example of how

not to relate to Jesus. He places himself above Jesus, evaluating him. There is a coldness about him. There is no sense of being in Jesus' debt. There is no sense of needing what Jesus came to bring. While the woman conveys the idea that she needed what Jesus had given her – that his compassion and acceptance was precious to her, that she had some insight into his status and that she loved him with a very deep love.

And that is what the story is teaching us is the appropriate way to relate to Jesus. Not as someone who stands above him criticizing him, but as someone who is overwhelmed with love and gratitude because of his compassion and as someone who is passionate about showing him reverence and respect.

Now the story does not end here. Jesus has observed the sinful woman and he has observed Simon's response to her, and he has something to say. It is significant that Jesus answered Simon's thoughts. Jesus is being presented as one who knows our thoughts. Another hint that that he is more than a regular human being. Jesus tells a little parable. Verse 41-42 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answers "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And Jesus says, "You have judged rightly."

Now it is clear from the story itself and Jesus' application of it that follows that the parable is comparing Simon and the sinful woman. But we must understand that Jesus is speaking of the difference of the perception of debt, not about the actual size of the debt. In the parable Jesus compares the size of the two debts – but his point is not that Simon the Pharisee had few sins and the sinful woman had many sins. The sinful woman had many sins, but what is significant in the story is that she knew it. Simon is clearly also a great sinner. The story portrays him as a proud, self-righteous and unloving man. And Jesus in other places makes it very clear that people who were like Simon were great sinners. In Matthew 23 Jesus says a number of times, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" He calls them "serpents [and] a

brood of vipers” and he asks rhetorically, “how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”

Clearly Jesus was not suggesting that Simon the Pharisee was less of a sinner than the sinful woman was. This story has to do with the knowledge of sin. And Jesus’ point is if we think that our debt of sin is small we will love the forgiver less, but if we understand the reality that our debt is huge, then we will love much.

Jesus goes on to compare Simon and the woman in the light of his little parable. The woman had shown Jesus great love and respect. She had wet his feet with her tears. She had kissed his feet. She had anointed his feet with anointment. On the other hand, Simon had not shown any love or respect for Jesus. He had not even given him water for his feet. He had not even given him the customary greeting of a kiss. He had not anointed Jesus head with oil. Simon had treated Jesus coldly. There was no warmth in his greeting. There was no love. There was not gratitude. There was no respect.

And so Jesus says in verse 47 “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” Again Jesus here is speaking about the knowledge of sin. Simon did not see himself to be much of a sinner and so Jesus held no attraction to him as one whose message was an offer of the forgiveness of sins. The woman understood that she was a great sinner and so Jesus’s message of forgiveness was supremely precious to her and Jesus’ himself with his compassion for sinners was supremely precious to her. And she demonstrated her love by how she related to Jesus.

Now verse 47 could give the impression that the woman was forgiven because of her love. Jesus says there, “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much.” Jesus does not mean here that the woman was forgiven because of her love. He means rather that the love was evidence of her having been forgiven. We know that because of the rest of Jesus’ teaching about salvation and what he says in verse 50. “Your faith as saved you; go in peace.”

The story is telling us that the love of the sinful woman which was rooted in her knowledge of her sinfulness and her knowledge of Jesus’

compassion and message of forgiveness was evidence of her faith and thus of her forgiveness. And it is contrasting that with the coldness and self-righteousness of Simon the Pharisee which was evidence of his lack of faith and thus of the fact that he was not forgiven. Jesus told the woman that her sins were forgiven. He said no such thing to Simon the Pharisee. And that silence speaks volumes.

So this passage is calling us to examine ourselves in the light of the self-righteousness of Simon the Pharisee and in the light of the grateful love of the woman. It is asking us to consider how we respond to Jesus and his message. It is teaching us that it is possible to think that we are right with God because we are self-righteous when in fact we are still in our sins. And it is teaching us that the way to forgiveness involves knowing that we are great sinners and that Jesus welcomes great sinners who come to him in faith for forgiveness. It also gives insight into the love that results when those who know themselves to be great sinners are forgiven.

We need to examine ourselves. This passage is teaching us that not everyone who is religious is saved. There are ways of being very meticulous about law-keeping while being strangers to Jesus and his mercy. One sign of this is feeling contempt for great sinners. Another sign is a coldness towards Jesus – a lack of love and heartfelt gratitude to him for his mercy towards great sinners.

This passage is a great encouragement for those who know themselves to be great sinners. We may live outwardly decent lives, but if we know ourselves to be great sinners, we understand that God is not just interested in externals, but in our hearts – in things like love, and compassion and whole-hearted devotion. If we see what God really requires of us then we will not feel superior to more flagrant sinners because we will understand that when it comes to our inner self – our thoughts and attitudes and loves and desires – we are just as lost as they are.

What a blessing if God has given us this kind of knowledge of sin. And the wonderful thing about this is that this is possible even for Pharisees – for the self-righteous. This passage and many others teach the sinfulness and offensiveness of self-righteousness. And those sins can

also be forgiven, if we realize that they condemn us no less than sins that are more external and obvious.

It is necessary to think carefully and deeply and prayerfully about our inner and outer life in the light of the word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Our text teaches that the way to great love for Jesus is to understand that we are great sinners and to embrace his forgiveness by faith. And the way to understand more accurately the greatness of our sinfulness is to open ourselves to the probing and exposing of the word of God. This passage is teaching us that knowing how great our sins and miseries are is necessary for us to love Jesus and to grow in that love. May we know something of what this woman experienced both her knowledge of her sin and her knowledge of Christ’s compassion for sinners.