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**The Gospel of Luke**  
**XXIII. Your Sins Are Forgiven**  
**Luke 7:36-50**

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Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner. No motive is given for this invitation, but Simon's true feelings toward Jesus are made clear from the moment Jesus appears at the door. In our day, when we invite a guest to dinner, certain rituals of basic hospitality are normal and expected. We greet our guests at the door, warmly invite them in, take their coats, invite them to take a seat, and offer them a beverage. That's just how things are done. And any omission of these basic rituals of hospitality could well be perceived by our guests as rudeness, even insult.

And if that is so in our culture, multiply that by about a thousand and you get how important these basic welcoming rituals of hospitality were in the time of Jesus – and still are very much so in the Middle Eastern world today. In Jesus' day, three things would have been expected of the host. Upon the guest's arrival, the host was expected to provide for the washing of the guest's feet. Think sandals, dirty roads, etc. If the guest was an honored guest, someone of higher status than the host, then it would be expected that the host himself would wash the feet of his guest. If of equal or lesser status than the host, then a servant would be assigned to do the foot washing – or, at the barest minimum, the host would provide a basin of water and a towel for the guests to wash their own feet.

And then, second, the host would be expected to greet his guest with a kiss. A welcoming kiss on the cheek if host and guest were on equal terms; a kiss on the hand if the honored guest held a higher status than the host. And then, finally, an anointing with oil. Again, think about a world without air conditioning, Right Guard, and fruity-smelling shampoo – a little perfume would go a long way to making the dinner more pleasant for all. These rituals of hospitality were taken so seriously that they might as well have been carved in stone as an eleventh commandment. Everyone knew to expect these three things. And everyone knew that to omit any of these rituals was to insult one's guest. To withhold deliberately and intentionally all three was akin to a physical slap in the face.<sup>1</sup>

So, Jesus enters Simon's house as the honored guest – and Simon does not wash His feet, doesn't even have a servant do it, doesn't even have a basin of water and a towel nearby. Jesus enters Simon's house – and receives no welcoming kiss. Jesus enters Simon's house – and no oil is offered to Him. This is more than rudeness. This is a very clear sign of contempt toward Jesus. The other guests, even the other Pharisees in the room, would have been shocked at what Simon had done – or, rather, deliberately not done to Jesus. And the atmosphere in that room instantly would have become electrified and tense – everyone waiting to see how Jesus would respond to

such a humiliating insult. The expected response would have been for Jesus to get up, spit in Simon's face, and leave. Instead, says our text, Jesus simply "*took his place at the table.*" That is the first surprise in our story – and surely we are to see it as a sign of just how much the divine love of our Savior falls even upon the likes of Simon the Pharisee. Perhaps also as a sign of an even greater love to come – of a Savior willing to bear even the insult and humiliation of the cross out of love for all of us sinners.

But then a second surprise quickly follows upon the first. Now, in that time and culture, especially if a guest of the status and popularity of Jesus was involved, it was not uncommon for uninvited persons to enter the house where the dinner was being held and to stand along the walls of the dining room, in order to hear the conversation at the table. So, picture the invited guests, including Jesus, reclining at a low table, just off the floor. Basically just more or less leaning on one side with their feet out behind them, away from the table – again, dirty roads, etc. meant the feet were kept as far from the food as possible. And then, just beyond the feet of the invited guests, ringing the walls of the dining room, a number of folks who had heard Jesus was there dining, and who have come in to hear the conversation between Jesus and Simon and the other invited guests.

And there, in that line-up of listeners, is a woman – a very particular woman, one well known in that town for her work as a prostitute. Our text says that when she heard that Jesus was going to be at Simon's house, she brought with her an alabaster flask of ointment – probably worn on a chain around her neck, and also likely one of the tools of her trade that made it more bearable. She grabs her flask of ointment and heads out for Simon's house. The fact that she grabs her flask of ointment means that she is coming to Simon's house with the intention of anointing Jesus with that oil as a sign of gratitude, honor, and reverence towards Him. Implying that she had been listening to Jesus' preaching – Jesus' preaching of the good news of the Gospel, of the possibility of forgiveness and of being given a new and clean start by the grace of God. And clearly also this preaching has reached her heart, moved her deeply, begun in her already that new life – as well as the leaving behind of her old life, her repentance in regard to what she has been. For, in pouring out that flask on Jesus, she will not only be showing Him gratitude for that grace, but also – by the emptying out of this essential tool of her trade – showing that she is done with that old life and already beginning a better life.

Anyway, she is there in the room – and so she sees the insult Simon inflicts upon Jesus – no foot washing, no kiss, no anointing. She watches the One who has given her this gift of new life being insulted and humiliated. Anger must have swiftly merged with devotion as she steps away from the wall and begins doing something almost as unthinkable as what Simon has done (or failed to do). She begins weeping, and with her tears washes the feet of Jesus. Tears of sadness, perhaps, for what she has been. Tears of gladness, perhaps, born of the forgiveness she has found in Jesus. Tears of joy at the new life opening up before her. Tears, perhaps, of anger at how her Savior is being treated. With her tears she washes the feet of Jesus. And then, in an even more shocking breach of etiquette, she lets down her hair to use as a towel to dry His feet. And then, having washed and dried the feet of Jesus, she begins to kiss them. And kissing them, she opens up her alabaster flask and pores it out completely – she's not going to need it anymore, thanks to Jesus – she pours it out, anointing the feet of Jesus. All that Simon has refused, she has now done.

And Simon is watching all of this with a glare of utter contempt for both Jesus and this woman. He knows who she is and what she has been. And to him it just proves that Jesus is not a real prophet, that He is not a man of God at all, that He should just lie there and let her – a woman like her – do these things to Him. But Jesus is also looking at Simon, and reading the thoughts of Simon's heart. "*Simon,*" Jesus says, "*I have something to say to you.*" The first words Jesus has spoken since entering. Can you just imagine the atmosphere in that room?! "*Simon, I have something to say to you.*"

And then Jesus begins to tell Simon a story: "*A certain money lender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii [a very large sum of money!], and the other fifty [a lesser debt – but not nothing!]. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?*" Simon begins his answer to Jesus, "*I suppose . . .*" Which indicates that while even Simon knows that the answer to Jesus' question is obvious, he doesn't really want to have to say that answer. "*I suppose,*" Simon says, "*the one for whom he cancelled the larger debt.*" Jesus says to Simon, "*You have judged rightly.*"

And then Jesus turns and looks at the woman – that's an important point. Jesus turns and looks at the woman – and can you just imagine what that look from Jesus, as well as His words which follow, must have meant to her? To have Jesus looking upon her, valuing her, blessing her – had ever a man looked at her like that before, spoken of her like that before? Can you imagine her heart emptying out all of her shame and fear and feelings of worthlessness, and filling instead with joy, with assurance, with the power of His love?

But there's even more to it than that. Jesus turns and looks at her while continuing to speak to Simon, "*Do you see this woman?*" Of course, this woman and her activities have been all that Simon has been looking at – but looking at her, Simon has not truly seen her. He has been seeing her only as who she has been and in terms of what he has harshly judged her to be. "*Do you see this woman?*" – Jesus inviting Simon truly to see her, not merely to look at her.

And then Jesus says to Simon – while still looking at her, as if to force Simon to see her – Jesus says to Simon:

*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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.*

And then He says to the woman – confirming what has already taken place – but saying it nonetheless: "*Your sins are forgiven.*" We don't know how Simon reacted to this, but clearly the room finally exploded in an uproar. The invited guests, perhaps even the folks hugging the wall, turning to one another in either outrage or wonder while saying the same thing: "*Who is this who even forgives sins?*" And in the midst of that uproar all around them, Jesus speaks a final blessing

to the woman: “*Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*” And so ends one of the most extraordinary stories that we find in all the Bible.

But what are we to make of this story? I suppose the answer to that question could have to do with whether we most identify ourselves in that story either with Simon or with the woman. But I would like to propose to you that we, instead, consider the possibility that we are all a little, or maybe even a lot, like both. Are we not, at one and the same time, both those who are in desperate need of God’s grace, and yet also those stubbornly resistant to the full workings of that grace?

But, above all else, let us consider that this is a story, ultimately, about God’s love for us all – and what that love can do in and for us, and even make us to become, if we will let it. The love of Jesus for this woman, the forgiveness and peace that has now entered her heart, her life through the power of that love – we see in this story how it transforms her, how it redeems her from her past, how it makes all things new for her. And God loves you and He loves me and He loves this whole wide world with exactly that same depth and breadth of His love. I love something Anne Lamott once wrote about God’s love: “*You want to know how big God’s love is? The answer is: it’s very big. It’s bigger than you’re comfortable with.*”<sup>2</sup>

And I think also of something Henri Nouwen once wrote, something I turn to from time to time in my own spiritual journey. It’s from his book, Life of the Beloved:

*We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That’s the truth of our lives . . . That’s the truth spoken by the voice that says, “You are my Beloved.”*

*Listening to that voice with great inner attentiveness, I hear at my center words that say: “I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests . . . I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst . . . Nothing will ever separate us . . .*

*Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply. It is like discovering a well in the desert.*<sup>3</sup>

That love, that divine love, has found this woman – and made her well, made her new, made her joyful, made her His.

But Simon, too, is beloved of Jesus, to the same extent with which Jesus loves that woman – if only he would allow himself to discern his own need for that love. One easily overlooked

detail in the parable Jesus tells is that the moneylender willingly forgives the debt of both debtors – both the one who owes much (the woman), and the one who owes less (Simon). Jesus is offering to Simon the same love, the same grace, the same opportunity and possibility of a new and richer life – if only Simon will acknowledge his need for that love, confront his own sinfulness in light of that grace, open his sin-hardened heart to God’s new-life giving power.

One commentator I read spoke of the fact that there are actually two great sinners in this story – not one large and one small – but two great big sinners, both the woman and Simon. And that, by the end, it is clear that Simon is actually the far larger sinner, far more a sinner than the woman. For Simon’s sin is that he thinks he has no need of grace – and that he has, therefore, closed himself off completely to Jesus:

*It is the sin of  
 Lips that won't kiss  
 Knees that won't bend  
 Eyes that will not weep  
 Hands that will not serve  
 Perfume that will never leave the jar  
 It is the sin of  
 A heart that will not break  
 A life that will not change,  
 A soul that will not love<sup>4</sup>*

If only Simon could see his sin and see the outstretched arm of the One who loves him, who is waiting to show mercy upon him, who is willing to suffer any and all humiliation and rejection just in order to be near to Simon, who is only waiting to grant to him that same love and peace and joy and new life now filling the heart of the woman. She needed grace for a heart that was broken and for a life that was a mess. Simon needs grace for a heart that is hardened and for a life that has become inflexible, dried up, and cold. Come on, Simon, say yes! Let Him in! Let His grace fill you and thrill you and change you and conquer you and make all things new for you! Come on, Simon, say yes!

And may we, who also are the Beloved of God – may we, also, continue to do the same.

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<sup>1</sup> My understanding of Biblical hospitality, as well as of the interpretation of this story as a whole, is drawn from chapter 18 of Kenneth E. Bailey’s magnificent book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 239-260.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, Grace (eventually): Thoughts on Faith (New York: Riverhead, 2007), p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp. 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> John Ortberg, Everybody’s Normal Till You Get To Know Them (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 213. Ortberg’s book was also very helpful in interpreting this story – see chapter 11 of his book, “The Secret of a Loving Heart: Gratitude, pages 204-218.