

HE GRACED THEM
Luke 7:40-47

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Apparently, I have the reputation for being very pointed, direct, and asking less-than-cuddly questions during possible employment interviews. For example, Dr. Barrett remembers that during his interview I turned and asked, “What is the single most important element for a good Sunday School experience?” I wanted one answer, and one answer only. You’ll be glad to know that Dr. Barrett passed with flying colors. He said, “The teacher. A good teacher is the single most important element to a productive Sunday School experience.” A good teacher can do a lot with bad curriculum, but a bad teacher can’t do anything with good curriculum. That’s why Sunday School teachers around here are prized persons.

He remembered on another interview that I asked a potential children’s minister, “When it comes right down to it, what is more important: policies or people?”

She replied, “Well, policies and rules are awfully important.” Robby said that, right then, he knew that I was done. There wasn’t any saving her; she had already sunk her ship with me. She had that spirit of Simon in our biblical story today. She had the spirit of a Pharisee. Law. Law. Rule. Rule. Always go by the law. Focus on the letter of the law and forget the spirit of the law, which is to serve and protect people.

I’ll give you an example of how this plays out. This is a true story.

There was a professor at a seminary who was very strict about the due dates on his papers. Either the papers were turned in on or before the published due dates, or you got an F for the semester. No exceptions. The syllabus was pretty clear. A student came in who had not turned in his paper on the assigned due date. He began the conversation with the professor, “Dr. Smith, I know that your syllabus says that there are no exceptions to the late paper. But I just thought you ought to know that my paper was not turned in yesterday because on the evening before, my wife began having birth pains. I rushed her to the hospital. Shortly after midnight, she gave birth to a boy. Our son weighed eight pounds. We named him Kenneth.”

The professor listened with interest. You could tell he had to think about this one. He moved his chair back from the desk, looked up at the ceiling, and, after a long pause, he looked across at the student and said, “Then you receive an F for my course.”

The news spread rapidly across the seminary, and a large delegation of students came to the professor’s office to protest. “Why have you been so cruel and harsh?” they demanded. The professor replied, “At the beginning of the semester, I gave my word concerning the papers.

**If the word of a teacher in a Christian seminary cannot be trusted, then whose word can?"
The students were dismissed. (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 18)**

The professor should have been named "Simon," because he matches the Simon in our story today. The Simons who are interested only in the letter of God's law are not displaying the heart of God.

Let me personalize the story. Something very similar to that happened to me. I was enrolled in a history class under Professor Robert Reid at Baylor University, the renowned masterful teacher who could make ancient history come to life.

My first child was born, and I missed his last exam. The baby came quite a bit early, so there was no way to predict it – to ask to take the exam early. So I just didn't show up. I explained. "Professor Reid, I'm sorry I didn't show up to take your exam but my first child was born. I was up all night. I'll be willing to do whatever I need to do to make it right." Same scenario – I had skipped the test because I had been up all night with the birth of Ryan.

"Rev. Batson," Professor Reid said, "you've got an A in this class already. No need to worry about making it up. Tell your wife congratulations, and don't you worry about it." I felt a wave of grace.

Two men. Both in Christian settings. Both trying to be like Christ. Both with completely different responses. Which one was really like the spirit of the Christ?

That brings us to our text today – our text about Simon, Jesus, and the woman who was a sinner.

Jesus knew what they'd been saying about him. "The Son of Man [speaking of Jesus] has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (v. 34)

Jesus has been accused of welcoming sinners into his company. He is a glutton and a drunkard because He goes to the wrong houses and eats with the wrong people – you know, people like Matthew and his friends – tax gatherers and sinners. But we learn also in our text today that Jesus is no respecter of persons. Not only will he go to Matthew's house for a party, He will also go to a Pharisee's house for a party – a Pharisee named Simon.

Verse 36

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

Jesus doesn't play favorites; he'll accept your invitation – sinner or saint. Moral riffraff or self-righteous, it didn't matter to Jesus. In fact, in Luke's gospel, there are three unique instances in which Jesus accepts a Pharisee's invitation to share a meal (7:36; 11:37-54; 14:1-24). And in every case, Jesus confronts His Pharisee host, outwitting him with His divine insight.

The Pharisees, of course, were held in high favor, and, thus, were influential with the common people. Their essence was strict interpretation and observation of the Law. And in every encounter with the Pharisees in Luke's gospel until now, Jesus has faced stern opposition.

By the time we come to Luke 7, Jesus knows the Pharisees' disdain for His open hands and open heart. But He is not spoiling for a fight. Looking at their history with our Lord, however, you know putting Jesus in the presence of the self-righteous is like putting cats and dogs in a closed pen. The fur is going to fly.

In verse 37, a woman, who is identified as a sinner, found out that Jesus is having dinner over at Simon's house. She shows up with a vial of perfume. Life, in antiquity, was lived in the public, not behind walls. The large homes had courtyards. The rooms around all opened into the courtyard, and entertainment was often thought of as a public affair. In fact, Jesus and Simon might even be dining in the courtyard. Verse 37 starts out, "And behold..." – meaning the doorbell rang when nobody was expecting her company. The sinful lady wasn't on the guest list.

Now Luke simply identifies the woman as a sinner. What's more, everybody in town knows she's a sinner. Luke doesn't tell us the nature of her sin – adultery, prostitution – but does it really matter? I think not, or Luke would have told us. I think the lack of description is indication enough that it didn't make any difference to Jesus, it didn't make any difference to Luke, so it shouldn't make any difference to you or to me.

The woman, a sinner, begins to weep in the presence of Jesus. She wets the feet of Jesus with her tears, wiping them with the very hair of her head. Kissing His feet, she anointed them continuously with her precious perfume. In fact, the Greek construction here is "was kissing" and "was anointing." Maybe the best translation is, "She continued kissing His feet and kept on anointing them" (cf. v. 45). Tears of gratitude. Tears that rejoice in sin forgiven. The thanksgiving of relief.

Her actions are humiliating, for even a Jewish slave could not be made to wash his master's feet. Streets were dirty, shoes were few, and animal dung plentiful enough in the path that feet had a low reputation in antiquity. The ultimate insult to a vanquished enemy was to make him a footstool, a place to rest your dirty feet (Psalm 110:1). John the Baptist said he wasn't worthy to even untie the sandals of our Lord (Luke 3:16). But in this passage, the woman's actions of humility toward the feet of Jesus are mentioned six times.

Perhaps she captures Isaiah 52:7, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, who announces peace, and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"

In Matthew 28:9, when the women encounter the resurrected Jesus, they clasped His feet and worshiped Him.

With verse 39, we get to read the mind of the Pharisee. "Hey, if Jesus were a real prophet, He would know what kind of woman this was. And He wouldn't let her touch Him." Do you see the arrogance of Simon's thoughts? He assumes that God shares his judgment and, therefore, if Jesus has anything to do with God – that is, if He's a prophet of God, a spokesman for God – He would also judge the woman as well. You can sense the contempt in his thoughts. "If **this man** were a prophet..." You know, prophets are good at sniffing sin – like a hound dog on a trail. So if Jesus can't see this woman for who she really is, He can't possibly be a prophet.

Jesus, however, does have the power to read the thoughts of Simon. Verse 40: “Simon, I have something to say to you.” That was the Middle East equivalent of saying to a child, “You come here right now; I am about to set you straight.” And then Jesus tells Simon a story.

“There was a money lender, and there are two folk who owed him some money. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other 50. Neither one has the means to repay. The money lender just tore up the IOUs and said, ‘Forget about it guys, we’ll just forgive the debt.’” The translation of “graciously forgave” in verse 42, is literally this: “He graced them.” Oh to be graced, to be forgiven, to have your debt erased. He graced them.

“Which one of these debtors will love the money lender more?” And Simon said, “I suppose the one he forgave more.” And Jesus says, “You are correct. Do you see this woman who 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 she*, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss my feet. *You did not* anoint my head with oil, *but she* has anointed my feet with perfume.”

You have not, but she...

You have not, but she...

You have not, but she...

Simon knew the protocol. Students, or disciples, kissed the hands of the teacher in their greeting. If two men were equals, they kissed on the cheek. But no one was expected to kiss another’s feet. “Simon, you have not, but she has....”

Jesus said to the woman in verse 48, “Your sins have been forgiven.” It’s a done deal with Jesus. Jesus could see her sins, but He could see them as forgiven. And the crowd whispered to themselves, “Who is this man who even forgives sins?”

“Your faith has saved you, woman,” said Jesus. Jesus knew she wasn’t welcome there. “Go in peace.”

I want us to learn several things from this episode in the life of our Lord.

I. It is dangerous to only see the sin of others and not the sin of self.

Here is the oddity of this whole story. Simon is the biggest sinner. He’s judgmental. He’s self-righteous. He misses the identity of the Messiah. He ends up being rebuked by the Son of God. But he still doesn’t see his own sin.

One thing Simon got right. It is the role of the prophet to make plain the secrets hidden in a person’s heart. Jesus does know the woman’s heart and announces God’s verdict, “Her sins have been forgiven.” But He also knows Simon’s heart, and He exposes his inner thoughts and implies God’s verdict of displeasure.

It is so easy for me to see your sin. I can tell when you're angry, irritable. When you're gossiping. When you display pride. I can see everything sinful about you. But I fail to see what is sinful in me. As long as Satan can keep us focusing on what is wrong with everybody else in our world and not focusing on our own sin, then he controls us. In fact, we become quite a bit like him.

II. Forgiveness creates gratitude and love.

You see, Simon in the story ends up being a sinner too, just like the woman. His sins are probably more socially respectable – sins of pride, arrogance, hard-heartedness, insensitivity, and a judgmental spirit. The things that people rarely identify as sin. But he has no consciousness of his totally irretrievable sinful condition before God. He has no sense of absolute indebtedness to God or unmerited grace. He has never had the experience of having an IOU torn up by God because he doesn't think he owes God anything. He thinks he's a pretty good guy. As a result, he has no love or gratitude for God or for others.

The woman, on the other hand, is completely aware of her sin. She's aware of God's forgiveness, and she approaches God and weeps and anoints His feet because of the blessed gratitude that fills her heart.

III. You learn to forgive by being forgiven (v. 47)

Jesus assumes that if you have been truly forgiven by God, then you can do no other than forgive those who have wronged you. You wronged God – He let it go. Others wrong you – you have to let it go. The equation cannot be broken. Jesus, in fact, said those who do not forgive the trespasses of others, even as God forgives their trespasses, will wind up being unforgiven by the Father (Lord's Prayer).

Simon cannot forgive the sinner because Simon has not received grace.

IV. Jesus has the power to forgive sins. He has the power of God.

Notice the question of the crowd (v. 49). They began to say to themselves, "Who is this one who forgives sins?" The bystanders act as a chorus with their question.

It certainly challenges Simon's judgment that Jesus could not be a prophet. Why, He is more than a prophet – He is God, for only God has the right to say "your sins are forgiven."

He graced them. I want him to grace me, too.

There is a modern parable that circulates – whether it's true or not, I have no idea. It doesn't seem, to me, to matter.

Joe was driving down the highway faster than he should – 73 miles per hour in a 55 zone. Fourth time in as many months. How could one guy get caught so often?

The cop was stepping out of his car, the dreaded big pad in hand. Bob? “Oh no,” Joe thought to himself. Officer Bob from church. Joe shrunk father into his trench coat. This was worse than the coming ticket – having to face Bob. A Christian cop catching a guy from his own church. A guy who happened to be a little eager to get home after a long day at the office.

Jumping out of the car, he approached the officer he saw every Sunday, a man he’d never seen in uniform. “Hi, Bob. Fancy meeting you like this.”

“Hello, Joe.” No smile from Bob.

“Guess you caught me red-handed in a rush to see my wife and kids.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Bob seemed uncertain.

“I’ve seen some long days at the office lately. I’m afraid I bent the rule just a bit this once.” Joe toed at a pebble on the pavement, trying not to look Bob in the eye. “Diane said something about roast beef and potatoes tonight. Know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean,” Bob replied. “But I also know you have a reputation for speeding in our precinct.”

Ouch. This was not going the right direction. Time to change tactics.

“What’d you clock me at?”

“Seventy-one. Would you get back in your car, please?”

“Now wait a minute here, Bob. I checked as soon as I saw you. I was barely nudging 65.” The lie seemed to get easier with each ticket that he was issued.

“Please, Joe, in your car.”

Flustered, Joe hunched himself through the still-open door. Slamming it shut, he stared at the dashboard. Bob scribbled away on the pad. It would be a month of Sundays before Joe ever sat near this cop again at church.

A tap on the door jerked his head to the left. There was Bob, a folded paper in hand.

Joe rolled down the window a mere two inches, just enough for Bob to pass him the slip. “Thanks a lot, Bob.” Joe could not keep the sneer out of his voice.

Bob returned to his car without a word. Joe watched his retreat in the mirror. Unfolding the sheet of paper, he was wondering how much it was going to cost this time. Wait a minute. What was this? Some kind of joke? It wasn’t a ticket.

Joe began to read: “Dear Joe, Once upon a time I had a daughter. She was six when killed by a car. You guessed it – a speeding driver. A fine and three months in jail, and the man was free. Free to hug his daughters. All three of them.

I only had one, and I’m going to have to wait until heaven before I can ever hug her again. A thousand times I’ve tried to forgive that man. A thousand times I thought I had. Maybe I did. But I need to do it again. Even now. Pray for me. And be careful. My son is all I have left. Bob”

Joe turned around in time to see Bob’s car pull away and head down the road. Joe watched until it disappeared. He sat there in stunned silence – a silence that comes from drinking from the goblet of grace. He, too, finally pulled away and drove slowly home, thankful for his forgiveness and hugging a surprised wife and kids when he arrived.

God had a Son, and He was killed by a sinner. His life was taken, even if indirectly, by my sin and yours. Yet, He lifts the goblet of grace to our lips and says, “Drink deeply. Gulp graciously. You need all that I can give to be clean again.”

God graces us that we might grace others.