

**THE SWEET SMELL OF FORGIVENESS**  
**Luke 7:36-50**

**Dr. Howard Batson**  
**First Baptist Church**  
**Amarillo, Texas**  
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Jesus received an invitation from Simon the Pharisee to “come to dinner.” Even though Jesus didn’t have a lot of great things to say about the Pharisees, he RSVP’d, “I’ll be there.” In the first century, private parties were something of a public affair. The homes had open courtyards, and even those who were not invited could gather around and listen to the evening’s discussion, as long as they didn’t interrupt the invited guests.

Interestingly, Simon did not really invite Jesus as an equal. The Pharisee, for example, did not give the rabbi the usual courtesies of cultural respect that one would expect in first century Palestine. Simon skipped the anointing of Jesus’ head, skipped over the foot washing—and didn’t even give him a kiss of greeting. Perhaps the real reason that Simon invited Jesus “to dine” was out of a sense of curiosity. Hearing that Jesus was a popular “prophet” of some sort, Simon wanted to ponder exactly who this celebrity might actually be.

A woman who is “a sinner” hears about the party, makes preparation, and shows up—uninvited, a party crasher. Although Luke does not reveal the nature of her iniquity, the label “sinner” was probably a euphemism for a person of promiscuity. Jesus often attracted sinners, despite the fact that he himself was sinless. He, in fact, called sinners to repentance in preparation for the arrival of the kingdom of God and never soft-pedaled the moral demands of discipleship. Sinners, however, liked him and were drawn to him. Somehow, in the midst of his moralizing, Jesus was able to communicate the love, grace, and forgiveness of God. So they gathered around him—the tax collectors, sinners, and even women of questionable character. What was it they sensed in Jesus that made his message so meaningful, so inviting to them?

In the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, there hangs a painting by Paolo Veronese. It’s a painting that got him in trouble with the Inquisition (18 ft x 41 ft, “Christ in the House of Levi”). The painting depicts Jesus at a banquet with his disciples, complete with Roman soldiers playing in one corner, a man with a bloody nose on the other side, stray dogs roaming around, a few drunks, midgets, buffoons, slaves, and anachronistic drunk Germans. Called before the Inquisition to explain these irreverences (why the motley crew around the Christ?), Veronese defended his painting by showing from the Gospels that these were the very kinds of people with whom Jesus mingled. Scandalized, the Inquisitors forced him to change the title of the painting and make the scene secular rather than religious. Like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, the Inquisitors were scandalized by the tax collectors, the half-breeds, the foreigners, and the women of ill-repute who hung out with Jesus. They, too, had trouble swallowing the notion that these are the people God loves.

### **The Invitation (Luke 7:36)**

Luke, alone, tells us that Jesus occasionally dined by invitation with Pharisees (cf. 11:37; 14:1). According to New Testament scholar John Nolland, this is a clear indication that Jesus was a teacher of some social standing. Make no mistake, however; the invitations to dine with Pharisees were not to be taken as a sign of their blessing or approval. On the contrary, on each occasion when Jesus broke bread with a Pharisee, he offended his host.

### **The Sinner (Luke 7:37-39)**

“Behold!” Her grand entry and unexpected presence is proclaimed by Luke’s introductory exclamation: “Behold!” All of us have to be known for something, but how would you like to be known as simply “a sinner”? New Testament scholar Joel Green describes her thusly: “Undoubtedly, this characterization marks her as a prostitute by vocation, a whore by social status, contagious in her impurity, and probably one who fraternizes with Gentiles for economic purposes.” Using imperfect verbs to communicate continual action, Luke shows there was a continuation to her acts of care for Jesus. We might translate a portion of the passage this way to capture the continual sense of the verbs: “While weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and kept on wiping them with her hair and kept on kissing his feet, continually anointing them with perfume” (cf. Luke 7:45).

In first century table arrangements, the diners would recline with their heads toward the table and their feet positioned away from the banquet. While it might be lost on us, the first century readers would have noted the offensive nature of caressing someone’s feet. Think of the negative connotations associated with feet in scripture. The ultimate insult to a vanquished enemy, for example, is to make him a “footstool” (Psalm 110:1). Upon seeing Jesus, moreover, John the Baptist declares that he is unworthy to even untie the sandals of the one who is to come after him (Luke 3:16). And Jesus’ very disciples do not humble themselves enough to wash each other’s feet (John 13:1-20). This sinful woman, however, is identified with Jesus’ feet no less than six times in this passage—a posture of complete humility.

Perhaps her actions capture the essence of Isaiah 52:7, as she realizes, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (NRSV). Also, remember upon the resurrection of Jesus, the women “clasped his feet and worshiped him” (Matthew 28:9).

New Testament scholars actually argue over whether “letting down her hair” was a provocative act when performed in public. For example, one New Testament scholar equates the letting down of her hair as “on par with appearing topless in public.” Yet another scholar observes, “A woman’s loosened hair did not always connote that the woman had loose morals, and...unbound hair on a weeping woman was naturally associated with grief, supplication, and gratitude.”

### **The Judgment (Luke 7:39)**

Observing this unusual act of complete devotion from the sinful, weeping woman, the Pharisee makes a judgment call concerning this rabbi—he can’t possibly be a prophet and let this woman touch him! With the stroke of a master writer, Luke lets us in on the private thoughts of the Pharisee, Simon. He has already categorized the woman as a loser and makes the bold assumption that God has joined him in casting her aside as a worthless sinner. If Jesus, therefore, has anything

to do with God, he should also share Simon's insight concerning the woman's worldly ways. With a tone of contempt, Simon addresses Jesus as "this one" (translated "this man"). True prophets can sniff sin's odor from miles away. Since Jesus does not denounce her or push her away, Simon assumes that Jesus cannot possibly be a true prophet.

One of the most unsettling things about this story is that Jesus "reads" Simon's mind. Unsettling, because we realize that God also knows our hearts, our thoughts. Maybe it was supernatural, or maybe it was a shocked expression on his face. Either way, Jesus knew that the Pharisee had reached a wrong conclusion. Simon knows everything about religion, but nothing about God. Give Simon a quiz on theology, ethics, temple worship, or the law, and he would graduate as valedictorian. Most frightening, however, is that though he knows everything, Simon knows nothing. Somehow he "has jumped into the swimming pool but never even gets wet." Despite the fact that he is surrounded by all the things, places, and people of God, he has missed the essence of it all. And the woman, ironically enough, has captured both the heart and forgiveness of God.

### **The Parable (Luke 7:41-47)**

Let me paraphrase Jesus' parable:

"Simon, think about it. There is a banker who has two people who aren't making their mortgage payments. One owes 500 denarii, and one just owes a tenth of that—50 denarii. When they were not able to pay, the banker just writes "cancelled" across the debt and forgives them both.

"Now, Simon, who will love the banker more? The one who owed a large debt or the one who owed the small debt?"

"I'm not sure," said Simon. "I suppose the one he forgave the greater debt."

"You're right," said Jesus. "Don't you understand this woman? I came to your house, and you didn't give me water for my feet. She has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss of greeting, 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're right, Simon; the lady is a sinner—whoa, is she a sinner! But her sins, which are so many, are now forgiven, for she has loved much. But he who is forgiven little—like you, Simon—loves little."

Everything about this Pharisee, Simon, and this woman stand in stark contrast. Simon was a religious professional; she was a professional sinner. Simon was respected; she was rejected. He dined with Jesus, and yet, could not even see him as a prophet. She, on the contrary, encountered Jesus and was forgiven—saved.

Concerning the cancellation of debts in the parable, the original Greek reads this way: the banker "graced" them. Simon had not been the best host, having not even provided Jesus with the basic amenities. He did not even offer Jesus water for his feet. Offering water for foot washing was a common courtesy (Genesis 18:2-8; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21. See also 1 Samuel 25:41; John 13:3-12; 1 Timothy 5:10). In this ancient world, every single gesture was "freighted with meaning." Omissions of niceties for one's guests, therefore, were often seen as a deliberate slight.

Concerning the woman's kissing the feet of Jesus, students or disciples of the day would customarily kiss the hand of their teacher as a greeting. And equals would kiss on the cheek. The oil, moreover, would have been used to refresh the face. Using tears as her water, and her hair as a towel, the woman had done everything Simon had neglected.

### **The Forgiveness (Luke 7:48-50)**

The highlight of every encounter with Jesus is that the repentant one finds forgiveness for his or her sins. The woman's encounter is no less. Having previously been twice identified as a sinner (7:37, 39), she is now identified as the "one who has been forgiven." What Jesus says to her is what we all long to hear from the Master, "Your sins are forgiven" (7:48).

Throughout the Bible, God shows a marked preference for "real" people over "good" people. Was it not Jesus who said there would be more rejoicing in heaven over the one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent (Luke 15:7)? Is it not Jacob, the rascal, whom God chooses above his brother (Genesis 25:23)? Is it not David, the adulterer and murderer, who becomes the greatest king that Israel has ever known (1 Samuel 16)? And wasn't the Apostle Paul on his way to Damascus to persecute the people of the Way when Jesus called him into the kingdom (Acts 9:1-19)?

The woman had faith. As God looks into our hearts, Jesus looked into the woman's heart, and he saw her faith (7:48). Jesus had the incredible ability of seeing people not for who they are, but for who they could become.

What about you? Do you have the ability to see people through the lens of God's grace? Or do you try to lock people into the prison of their past, remembering and rehearsing their sins of yesterday?

Simon could only see the woman for what she had done. And Jesus could only see her for who she could become. The powerful words that Jesus utters, "Your sins are forgiven," are the most liberating words that can ever be uttered to anyone. Each one of us longs to hear those humbling words, "Woman (or man), your sins are forgiven."

### **Conclusion**

Are you more like Simon or Jesus? Do you lock people into the prison of their past sins, or do you see people for who they can become in God's grace? Ironically, even two thousand years later, we act like the Pharisees when we label people and cast them aside as "too sinful" for God's kingdom.

Let the words of Jesus sink in—he who has been forgiven much, loves much. Are you humble enough to rejoice over God's grace? Does your devotion to Jesus show in extravagant acts of worship? Would you break the alabaster vial? Would you give Jesus your best?

Whenever Luke tells a story, he intends for each of his readers/listeners to find themselves in the story. Each of us is to identify with one character or another. Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you Simon the Pharisee, putting sinners in their rightful place, making certain they never rise above their sinful circumstances? Or are we like "the sinner," the woman who is so overcome by God's grace that she weeps in worship—loving much because she has been forgiven much?

