

Our scripture is from the book of Luke, and teaches us about forgiveness of sins and how we show our love to God for what God has done in our lives. Our lesson is very mild for our day, but at the time it was written it was quite scandalous!

**Jesus associated with women.** Jesus considered them partners in his ministry. He did not discriminate against them because they were female or because of past sins and conditions. In fact, Luke says that it was women that supported Jesus' ministry and that of the disciples. Jesus dared to cross social lines that were unheard of in his day. But Jesus showed that he came to give forgiveness of sins to all who would accept him, men and women, the rich and the poor, the righteous and the unrighteous.

Today we read about Jesus accepting an invitation to dinner. Jesus not only accepted hospitality from the publicans and sinners but also from the Pharisees. They needed the Word of God too, whether they realized it or not, as we all do. Jesus accepted an invitation to dinner from a Pharisee named Simon. We don't know Simon's motives for the invitation, but we know Jesus accepted and went.

The scene of dinner may have been the courtyard of the house of Simon the Pharisee. The houses of well-to-do people were built round an open courtyard in the form of a hollow square. Often in the courtyard there would be a garden and a fountain; and there in the warm weather meals were eaten. It was the custom that when a Rabbi was at a meal in such a house, all kinds of people came in—they were quite free to do so—to listen to the pearls of wisdom which fell from his lips. Also the poor were welcome to come and eat the leftovers. Since everything was open, no locked doors, they could even enter the banquet hall and speak to a guest.

Normally when a guest entered such a house three things were usually done. The host placed his hand on the guest's shoulder and gave him the kiss of peace, as a mark of respect which was never omitted in the case of a distinguished Rabbi.

Roads were only dust tracks, and shoes were just soles held in place by straps across the foot; so cool water was poured over the guest's feet to cleanse and comfort them. Either a pinch of sweet-smelling incense was burned or a drop of rose water was placed on the guest's head. Good manners demanded these things, but in this case none were done.

In the east the guests did not sit, but reclined, at table. They lay on low couches, resting on the left elbow, leaving the right arm free, with the feet stretched out behind; and during the meal the sandals were taken off.

A woman arrived at the dinner after she learned that Jesus was eating there. She had lived a sinful life, and was probably a prostitute in the community. Her life was known enough for the Pharisee to characterize her as a sinner. But, no doubt she had heard Jesus speak from the edge of the crowd and had understood a message which could lift her from her sinful ways. No, she was not an invited guest at the dinner gathering, but came in anyway with a jar of perfume. Round her neck she wore, like all Jewish women, a little flask of concentrated perfume; they were called alabasters; and they were very costly. She wanted to pour it on his feet, because it was all she had to offer. As the woman stood behind Jesus, her tears began to fall on His feet. The passage does not say why she was weeping, but it may have been because she was seeking repentance or she may have been weeping for joy at the opportunity of being around the One she obviously considered to be the Messiah.

She also bent over Jesus and wiped her tears off His feet with her hair. SCANDALOUS! For a Jewish woman to appear with hair unbound was an act of the great immodesty. On her wedding day a girl bound up her hair and never would she appear in public with it unbound again. The fact that this woman loosed her long hair in public showed how she had forgotten everyone except Jesus. And she constantly kissed His feet, a sign of the utmost respect, submission, and affection.

Remember I told you this story was scandalous. In that day women were not invited to banquets. Jewish rabbis did not speak to women in public, nor did they eat with them in public. A woman of this type would not be welcomed in the house of Simon the Pharisee. So, Simon was embarrassed, both for himself and for his guests. People had been saying that Jesus was a great Prophet, but He certainly was not exhibiting much prophetic discernment if He allowed a sinful woman to anoint His feet! He must be a fraud. Simon came to three conclusions: 1) if Jesus was a prophet, he would know what kind of woman was anointing his feet; 2) if he knew what kind of a woman she was, he would not let her do it; and 3) since he does let her anoint his feet, he is no prophet and should not be acknowledged as a prophet! A real prophet would not have let her touch Him, for a touch by a sinner brought ceremonial uncleanness.

The woman admitted she was a sinner and gave evidence that she was a *repentant* sinner. She had heard Jesus' gracious invitation, "Come unto Me... and I will give you rest." Perhaps that was when the woman turned from her sin and trusted the Savior. Her tears, her humble attitude, and her expensive gift all spoke of her changed heart.

But Jesus, knowing Simon's thoughts, taught in a parable that a person who is forgiven much loves more than a person who is forgiven little. In the parable one man was forgiven a debt 10 times greater than another man—500 denarii compared with 50 denarii. These were huge debts, as one denarius coin was worth a day's wages. When asked which one would love the lender more, Simon correctly responded that the one who was forgiven the larger debt would naturally be more inclined to have and demonstrate greater love. Jesus then applied the parable to the woman.

The woman had been forgiven much and therefore she loved Jesus very much. Jesus was not implying that the Pharisee did not have need for forgiveness. His

point was that “a sinner” who is forgiven is naturally going to love and thank the One who has forgiven her. Simon’s treatment of Jesus was vastly different from the woman’s. She was evidencing that she loved Jesus because she realized that she had been forgiven of so much. In contrast, Simon saw himself as pure and righteous; that’s what Pharisee meant to them; and therefore he did not need to treat Jesus in a special manner. In fact, he did not even extend to Jesus the normal courtesies of that day. In effect he did not seem to think Jesus could do anything for him and he did not consider Jesus a prophet.

But let us be clear, the woman was not forgiven because of her love; no, she loved because she was forgiven. Her faith brought her salvation. Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Her faith caused her to respond in love. The other dinner guests wondered who Jesus is since He forgave sins. Although Jesus in this interchange with Simon never claimed to be the Messiah, He spoke as He did because He is the Messiah.

Simon’s real problem was lack of understanding. It was easy for him to say, “*She* is a sinner!” but impossible for him to say, “I am also a sinner!” Jesus proved that He was indeed a prophet by reading Simon’s thoughts and revealing his needs.

The amount of the debt was really not the important thing in this parable. The *amount* of sin in a person’s life is not the point, but the *awareness* of that sin in his or her heart. How much sin must a person commit to be a sinner? Simon and the woman were both sinners. Simon was guilty of sins of the spirit, especially pride, while the woman was guilty of sins of the flesh. Her sins were known, while Simon’s sins were hidden to everyone except God. *And both of them were bankrupt and could not pay their debt to God.* Simon was just as spiritually bankrupt as the woman, only he did not realize it.

Forgiveness is a gift of God's grace; the debt was paid in full by Jesus Christ. The woman accepted God's free offer of salvation and expressed her love openly. Simon rejected that offer and remained unforgiven.

The woman was guilty of sins of commission, but Simon was guilty of sins of omission. Everything that Simon neglected to do, the woman did—and she did it better!

Two errors we must avoid as we interpret Jesus' words. First, we must not conclude that this woman was saved by her tears and her gift. Jesus made it clear that it was *her faith* alone that saved her, for no amount of good works can pay for salvation.

Nor should we think that lost sinners are saved by love, either God's love for them or their love for God. God loves the whole world, but the whole world is not saved. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). Grace is love that pays a price, and that price was the death of the Son of God on the cross.

Jesus did not reject either the woman's tears or her gift of ointment, because her works were the evidence of her faith. We are not saved by faith plus works; we are saved by a faith that leads to works. This anonymous woman shows the truth of Galatians 5:6, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

The woman knew that her sins were forgiven by Jesus' word, and we know today that we have been forgiven by God's Word. Once we understand the meaning of God's grace we have no trouble receiving His free and full forgiveness and rejoicing in it.

Of course, the legalistic critics at the dinner were shocked when Jesus said, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven." By saying this, Jesus was claiming to be God! But He *is* God, and He died for the sins that she committed. His words of forgiveness were not cheap words; they cost Him dearly on the cross. How was

this woman saved? She repented of her sins and put her faith in Jesus Christ. For the first time in her life, she had peace with God.

Jesus had performed many miracles of healing and had even raised a widow's son from the dead. But his greatest miracle of all was His saving this woman from her sins and making her a new person, as he does for us today when we receive Him as our Lord and Savior. Simon only saw the woman's past, but Jesus saw her future. She encourages us to believe that Jesus can take any sinner and make him or her into a child of God.

But God's forgiveness is not automatic; we can reject His grace if we will. In 1830, a man named George Wilson was arrested for mail theft, the penalty for which was hanging. After a time, President Andrew Jackson gave Wilson a pardon *but he refused to accept it!* The authorities were puzzled: should Wilson be freed or hanged? They consulted Chief Justice John Marshall, who handed down this decision: "A pardon is a slip of paper, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged."

The one thing which shuts a person off from God is self-sufficiency, thinking that we don't need God. It is true to say that the greatest of sins is to be conscious of no sin; but a sense of need will open the door to the forgiveness of God, because God is love, and love's greatest glory is to be needed. If you have never accepted God's pardon, now is the time to believe and be saved.<sup>1 2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:223

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 93