

LUKE 7:36–50

The Sinful Woman: Extravagant Love Born of Forgiveness

A respectable man named Simon throws a respectable dinner for Jesus and his respectable friends. The wine is good. The conversation, presumably, is polite. And then she walks in.

She is uninvited. She is not respectable. Luke does not give her a name, but he gives her a label: "a woman of the city, who was a sinner." In that culture, in that context, every man at the table would have understood what was meant. She would have been the last person Simon wanted in his dining room. She would have been the last person almost any reader would have expected to kneel at the feet of the Son of God.

And yet she comes. She brings a flask of expensive perfume. She weeps so hard that her tears fall on His feet. She loosens her hair in public, a thing no respectable Jewish woman would have done, and uses it to dry His feet. She kisses His feet. She pours out her perfume. She says nothing. She does everything. By the end of the dinner, Jesus has rebuked the host, declared her sins forgiven, and used her to teach the most important lesson of the night. This is the story of what a forgiven heart looks like. Read Luke 7:36 to 50 carefully this week, and watch the way Jesus defends a sinner against a self-righteous man in his own house.

First impressions

This event is recorded only in Luke and takes place much earlier in Jesus' ministry than the anointing in Bethany (Matthew 26; Mark 14; John 12). Different city (Galilee, not Bethany), different host (Simon the Pharisee, not Simon the leper or the Bethany household), different woman (an unnamed sinner, not Mary of Bethany), and different purpose. The two events make different points and should not be blended together. See the Study Skill below.

Study Skill, Distinguishing Similar Events in the Gospels: Sometimes two Gospel scenes look alike on the surface but are actually distinct events. The two anointings of Jesus, the two feedings (5,000 and 4,000), and the two temple cleansings (early in John, late in the Synoptics) are good examples. The way to tell whether scenes are the same is to compare time, place, persons, and details. If any of those diverge significantly, you are likely looking at two separate events. The opposite mistake is also common: treating the same event in two Gospels as if it were two events. Slow, careful comparison is the only way through.

1.
 - a. Read Luke 7:36 to 50 carefully, ideally aloud. After your first reading, what is your impression of the woman?
 - b. Of Simon the Pharisee?
 - c. Of Jesus?

Two arrivals (7:36–38)

Banquet customs in the first century included several courtesies extended to guests. A servant would wash the guest's feet (because sandaled feet picked up the dust of the streets). The host would greet the guest with a kiss and would anoint the guest's head with oil. Verses 44 to 46 reveal that Simon did none of these. He invited Jesus, but he did not honor Him. Hospitality without honor is hardly hospitality at all.

2.
 - a. Read 7:36. Why might a Pharisee have invited Jesus to dinner?
 - b. What does Simon's failure to extend the customary courtesies (see 7:44 to 46) tell us about how he viewed his guest?
3.
 - a. Read 7:37. How does Luke introduce the woman?
 - b. What do you imagine she had heard or seen of Jesus that brought her, uninvited, into a Pharisee's dining room?

For Thought and Discussion: Sometimes the people who most need Jesus are the ones the church is least likely to make comfortable. Who, in your congregation or community, might feel like the sinful woman walking into Simon's house? What does our welcome (or our cold shoulder) say to them?

4. Read 7:38. List everything the woman does, slowly, in order. What is each act communicating?

For Further Study: In that culture, a Jewish woman did not let down her hair in public. It was considered intimate, even shameful. She did it anyway. The risk of public scandal would not have been lost on her. What does her willingness to be misunderstood tell us about her heart?

Simon's private thought (7:39–40)

5.
 - a. Read 7:39. What does Simon think to himself? What two things does Simon become certain of in that single thought?
 - b. Why is it ironic that Jesus immediately demonstrates He is in fact a prophet by reading Simon's mind?
6. Read 7:40. Jesus calls Simon by name and asks permission to speak. Why does He extend that courtesy?

The parable of the two debtors (7:41–43)

7. Read the parable in 7:41 to 42. What is the situation? What is the question?
8. Read Simon's answer in 7:43. He answers correctly, but notice the slightly distant phrasing: "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." What does Simon not yet realize about which character he is in the parable?

For Further Study: Jesus' parable assumes a doctrine that runs through the whole Bible. Every sinner owes a debt to God that he or she cannot pay. Compare Matthew 6:12; Matthew 18:21 to 35; Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23; Colossians 2:13 to 14. How does the language of debt help us understand both the gravity of sin and the wonder of forgiveness?

Her love measured (7:44–47)

9. Read 7:44 to 46 carefully. List the contrasts Jesus draws between Simon and the woman.

Luke 7:47 is one of the most carefully worded sentences in the Gospels. A literal rendering of the Greek is: "Her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much." At first glance, the verse seems to say her love earned her forgiveness. But the structure of the sentence in Greek, together with the parable Jesus has just told (in which forgiveness produces love, not the other way around), and Jesus' own final word to her in 7:50 ("Your faith has saved you"), all point in the other direction. Her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love makes plain. Her love is the evidence of her forgiven heart, not the price she paid for it. Forgiveness comes first; love is the natural fruit (1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us").

Study Skill, Letting Hard Verses Be Interpreted by Clearer Ones: Some verses have been read more than one way through the history of the church. When you meet such a verse, the first rule is to be slow rather than quick. Read the verse in its paragraph, in its book, and in the rest of the Bible. Ask which interpretation harmonizes with everything else God has said on the subject. Luke 7:47 is a good example. Read alone, it can sound like the woman's love purchased her forgiveness. Read in context, and alongside 1 John 4:19; Ephesians 2:8 to 10; Titus 3:4 to 7; and Galatians 5:6, the picture is clear. Forgiveness is God's gift, received by an obedient faith; love is the fruit that gift always produces in a forgiven heart.

10.
 - a. Read 7:47 carefully. What is the relationship Jesus is describing between her love and her forgiveness?
 - b. What does this say about the relationship between feeling forgiven and showing love?
11.
 - a. Jesus says at the end of 7:47, "He who is forgiven little, loves little." Who is He talking about?
 - b. Notice: Jesus does not say Simon has nothing to be forgiven. He says Simon thinks he has nothing to be forgiven. What is the difference, and which is the more dangerous condition?

For Thought and Discussion: John Newton, the former slave-trader who later wrote "Amazing Grace," said near the end of his life, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior." How does that capture the heart of what Luke 7 is teaching us?

"Your sins are forgiven" (7:48–50)

12. a. Read 7:48. What does Jesus say directly to the woman?

b. How does the room respond in 7:49?

For Further Study: Compare 7:49 with Mark 2:1 to 12, where Jesus forgives the paralyzed man's sins and the scribes ask the same question. What is the Gospels' consistent claim about Jesus' authority to forgive sins? Why would only God have that authority? And what does it mean that Jesus does?

13. a. Read 7:50. What is Jesus' final word to the woman?

b. Notice the three parts: faith, saved, peace. How does this sentence summarize the gospel?

Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (7:50). The kind of faith Jesus credits is not a private, abstract belief tucked away in the heart. It is the faith that has brought this woman in tears across the public threshold of a Pharisee's house to weep at His feet. James calls this kind of faith the only kind that saves (James 2:17, 24, 26). Paul calls it "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6) and "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). On the day of Pentecost, when convicted Jews asked what they should do, Peter said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The same kind of faith that brought this woman to Jesus' feet is what brings anyone to the place of forgiveness today, an obedient faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Your response

14. The woman gives us a picture of what it looks like to have really, truly experienced forgiveness. Describe her response in your own words. What do you see in her that you would like to see in yourself?

15. a. Simon gives us a picture of what it looks like to think we are fine. Where in your own heart do you see Simon tendencies?

b. When you look at yourself honestly, which of the two debtors in the parable are you?

Optional Application: Take ten minutes this week and make a list, not just of general sins, but of specific sins, that the blood of Christ has covered for you. Then thank Him by name for each. The point is not to wallow. The point is to remember. Forgiven people who remember are loving people.

16. Have you ever experienced forgiveness from Christ in the deep, settled way this woman did? If yes, what does she stir in you? If no, what would you say is keeping you from coming to His feet as she did? (For an answer in His own words, read Acts 2:36 to 41; Romans 6:3 to 4; 1 Peter 3:21.)

17. Where in your life is your love showing, toward Jesus, toward other believers, toward people who have hurt you, toward people the world has written off? What does the strength of your love reveal about the depth at which you have received His forgiveness?

18. Write one sentence summarizing what you most want to take away from this woman's story, and one concrete step you will take in light of it.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share, briefly, about a moment when she has felt deeply forgiven, by God, by another person, or both. What did it stir in her?

Discussion. This passage cuts deep on two sides. The sinner needs to hear she is welcome; the religious person needs to hear she is not as safe as she thinks. Be gentle but honest. Pay particular attention to questions 4 (her acts), 10 (forgiveness and love), 11 (Simon's blindness), and 16 (your response). Make sure Luke 7:50, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace," gets read aloud over the group at some point.

Wrap-up. Close by reading 1 John 1:5 to 10 and 1 John 4:19 aloud. Pray that every woman in your group would walk out the door tonight knowing, deeply, that she has been forgiven in Christ, and would love Jesus more because of it.