

A Tale of Two Responses to Grace

Luke 7:36-50

“When they could not pay, he cancelled (graciously forgave) the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Introduction: Familiarity can breed contempt. It can also dull our senses to the truth and reality of what we are engaged in. For instance, how often have we taken for granted the fact that we have an abundance of food to choose from and eat in this country? This is nothing to be ashamed of, but it is absolutely something we should be constantly thankful for. In order to insure this gratitude, we often install a prayer before a meal, to stop for a mere few seconds to acknowledge God’s provision and gracious hand before devouring what is in front of us. However, even a prayer can break down to mere formality and does not touch our heart, disengages our mind, and leaves our emotions detached. We take an amazing gift that a majority of the world does not enjoy, and we slowly and subtly **forget** that we do not deserve, are not entitled to, and are totally dependent on God’s hand for each and every breath and bite.

This same familiarity can be there when we are exposed to God’s grace. Remembering God’s grace will enliven our hearts to worship, will cause us to magnify Christ, and live for Him with passion. However, we can be so inundated with the truth, so familiar with eternally joyful concepts, that we can easily lose sight of our need, that we never deserved nor earned them, and we can turn the whole of life on to ourselves. This is what we are going to look at today in a story about Jesus interaction with a woman who was enlivened by grace, and a man who knew everything about it, and missed Jesus completely.

Where are you this morning? Are you energized by the truth, or has it become so familiar you don’t think you need it? Let’s let God’s Word speak to our minds and hearts and pray the Holy Spirit shines brightly so that we can understand the immensity of God’s grace in our lives.

Setting the Scene

An Insidious Invitation

Luke 7:36 *One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table.*

This was NOT an unusual occurrence. Often Pharisees would invite travelling teachers in the synagogues over to their house for a meal and further discussion. This was both a “thank you” and a meritorious act. The text is not clear as to the **motives** behind Simon’s invitation, but his actions throughout the story are clear they were not positive or thankful. When Jesus came into the house, normal, customary, and common courtesies were forgotten or ignored (at worst). Any guest in a home, if he were honored, would have had his feet washed, his face kissed, and head anointed (with oil, usually olive oil). There seemed to be a calculated contempt against Jesus, not open armed friendship. This was par for the course for the Pharisee’s at this time, who spent much of their time trying to catch Jesus in some slip up or misstep. (Luke 11:53-54)

A Cultural Faux Pas

Luke 7:37-38 *And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment,³⁸ and standing behind him at*

his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

The meal Jesus was invited to has to be re-imagined for our Western minds. The house Jesus entered would have had a low table where the guest would have reclined one their left elbow on low cushions or couches with their feet away from the food (for obvious reasons). Some occasions, such as this one, would have left the doors of the home open, where uninvited townspeople were free to observe the conversations. The text is clear, however, that the woman who stood by Jesus' feet was NOT expected (literally "behold").

She was identified twice in the text as "a sinner". This word could either mean she was married to a prominent sinner, or was a prostitute. The latter is undoubtedly the case. A prostitute entering a Pharisee's house did not happen, much less one who would engage with the guests. Not only was her presence unexpected, but her actions were scandalous as she made much of Jesus, but stayed in lowly position at Jesus' feet as she wept, dried, kissed, and anointed His feet. This left Simon in a huff, and he questioned Jesus in his mind.

A Pointed Question

Luke 7:39-41 *Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." ⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. **Now which of them will love him more?"***

Jesus responded to Simon's question by engaging him in conversation. Simon reluctantly responded. He told a quick parable of two debtors who owed a moneylender. Both owed different sums but neither could come up with payment (off to debtors prison or slavery for you!) A *denarii* was equivalent to a days wage, so one owed almost 2 months worth of work, the other almost a year and a half. The story ends with the lender himself bearing the debt and **graciously forgiving the debt owed**. To which Jesus asked the question we much each wrestle with this morning: *Now which of them will love Him more?"* The answer was obvious, and Simon knew it.

A Poignant Teaching

Luke 7:43-47 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? 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. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven- for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Jesus then shows us the point of the whole narrative. Though the woman's story provides insight into the repentant heart, Jesus was mainly reaching out to Simon. He pointed out what true faith demonstrated, as seen in this woman's love for Jesus. She recognized her sin, and though it was great, forgiveness was greater! Her faith led to forgiveness, worship, passion, and peace, things that slipped out of Simon's grasp. Simon had a major problem: **self-righteousness**. He could not see Jesus truly because he did not see himself as a true sinner, thus he COULD NOT LOVE JESUS.

This story illustrates **two responses to grace**: one that leads to love and worship of God in Jesus, and the other that stays committed to self as the supreme answer to life:

Soft-hearted response to grace

Reception of soft-hearted response to grace

Luke 7:50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Actions of Soft-hearted response to grace

- **Weeping** – A recognition and release of a forgiven person. This was not the type of tears of someone trying to hold back the flood waters, sniffing and wiping your nose. This was saying goodbye to your Kindergarten on the first day of school or seeing your daughter go off to college type of cry. This was an unashamed flood of tears that literally would have pooled up on Jesus' feet.
- **Letting her hair down** – The *Talmud* said that a Jewish woman in this culture could be divorced for letting her hair down in the presence of another man.¹ She was so enraptured with Jesus, so desirous to show love, that she did not care if she followed protocol, social grace, or if others may think less of her.
- **Kissing Jesus' feet** – A sign of grateful service and humble intimacy. She stayed at Jesus' feet, which showed that she recognized His authority, but many kisses represented a desire to have an intimate relationship, one that showed honor and respect
- **Anointing Jesus' feet** – Normal protocol would have been olive oil on the forehead, which was a cheap (or as we Dutch say, economical) source of blessing. However, oil that was stored in an alabaster container would have represented something far more valuable, costly, and of greater worth. This was a worthwhile use of something that would have cost much to acquire, since there was nothing too great to offer Jesus in terms of service.

Results of Soft-hearted response to grace

NOTE: Each of these is a **result** of salvation that is offered by grace alone, is believed by faith alone, is given by Christ alone, secured by the Spirit alone, to the glory of the Father alone. What was exemplified in this woman's life is true/possible for all who truly believe, repented, and follow Christ. The converse is also true: none of these can happen without first being justified in Jesus through the gospel.

- **Worship** - Worship was not coerced, forced, or boxed into an event for this former prostitute. Worship was the most natural reaction to the freedom she experienced. Bowing at Jesus' feet was not forced slavery, but the true release from being a slave to sin to being a slave of righteousness (see Romans 6:17-18). Worship was not about her feelings (though she felt deeply), was not about how she looked (I'm sure she was a mess), and was not about wondering what others thought (they thought she was a bit off, to say the least). Worship of a born again believer was truly focused on honoring and making much of Jesus, even at a personal cost.
- **Love** - Love can be talked about by anyone but cannot be conjured up on a whim. In other words, we can talk about love of others, but we cannot fake love when it comes to the selfless

¹ R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Preaching the Word, Vol. 1. p. 277.

and sacrificial nature of it. This woman **loved much** because she knew **she sinned much**. **This truth is key to love**. She experienced love personally, and could love because she was first loved (1 John 4:19). Once God shows us what love is, we understand what love does, and thus can love God in return. Without understanding our infinite inability to truly love God we can never truly love Him for who He is.

- **Passion** - There are many ways to drum up fake passion and very easy to show passion for those things we truly love (like the many idols in our lives). For this woman, passion oozed out of her. She was proactive. No one told her to be so bold as to enter a Pharisee's house, to buy costly perfume, and to approach Jesus' feet. This woman's love led to a **risk driven passion** since her life was now hidden in Jesus, and no one could take that away. Her passion was **focused, selfless, and God centered**.
- **Peace** - We can easily miss the last 3 words of this section, but we would miss the true power of this whole story if we did. Jesus told this woman to **go in peace**. Peace is something we may take for granted in this country (which seems obvious with the short term memory of people who forget what it cost to obtain the peace we enjoy today). While in her sin, this woman experienced **shame, dishonor, guilt, ridicule, and an ache in her soul that would not go away**. Sin had so burdened her that she could easily believe there was no hope for her, no way to make up for the shameful acts she'd performed, for the sheer immensity of her sin, and how she was viewed in the culture. But when Jesus offered forgiveness, He also offered the counter to each of these. She experienced freedom, release, acceptance, new life, and was now a **NEW CREATION**. When she looked in the mirror, she did not see something used and dirty, but something clean and new. Peace was made between her and God, which meant she could look up for the first time ever, because she knew God looked at her in love as a daughter.

Think about how you personally process and experience each of these: **worship, love, passion, and peace**. Are these evident in your life? Have these grown cold? Have you blamed this tepid response on something outside of yourself? When was the last time you wept over your sin? When was the last time that you were so gripped with the depth of your sin and completeness of your salvation that your only natural response was worship, love, passion, and peace.

What makes this woman's response so incredible was the polarizing response from Simon to Jesus' clear explanation of the gospel

Self-righteous response to grace

Simon was a Pharisee, which meant he knew and followed the Law but missed Jesus (John 5:39-40). It becomes clear that Simon was not seeking to honor Jesus, love, or worship Him, but looked to entrap Him, to catch Him in some misstep or false statement. It is also clear that He was frustrated and thus condescending to Jesus. Jesus' message went counter to what he believed, and since what he believed was "right", Jesus had to be wrong. His self-righteousness came out in many different ways in his interaction at this meal, and we gain insight into our own heart watching this play out.

In Response to Jesus as God

- **Disrespect of Jesus** - One way to downplay your enemy is to become condescending. Pharisee's so hated that Jesus claimed to be Messiah and the Son of God that they would concoct a way to kill Him for it. For now, when Jesus walked into his house, the Pharisee neglected normal,

cultural protocol for an invited guest: no water for His feet, no kiss, and no anointing. Jesus was gracious in His response, but the point was clear.

- **Wants to add Jesus for personal gain/agenda, but not yield to Him** - Simon had an agenda with Jesus, and it wasn't submissive worship. Jesus was influential, so keeping an enemy close was strategic, especially as Jesus held sway with the people. Self-righteousness does not look to yield to Jesus, but add Jesus, and make Him work for us.

In Response to others

- **Indignant at the sin and presence of others** - Notice how self-righteousness plays out. Without the willingness to admit one's own sin, we begin to see others through an artificial grid **we** create, which typically are those things we don't struggle with. He was indignant at a repentant prostitute because that sin was GREATER in his economy. This elevated himself ABOVE other sinners, and thus when someone entered his presence who was beneath him, he was filled with contempt. **What or who are those that we are indignant toward because they sin differently than us?**
- **No path of redemption for certain sinners** - In the degradation of his religion, there was no room for redemption of a type of person like this woman....she was too far gone. Every works based religion will have those who fit this category. This is a cautionary tale for us when it comes to the potential of the gospel to transform all people. This means that the worst of sinners become sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters. There are no second class citizens in God's family.
- **Disbelieving in the salvation of others** - One of the hard truths of following Christ is that we DO NOT KNOW THE HEART of a person. That means we don't truly know what went on with a person beyond his words and actions. Jesus said we would be known by our love and the fruit produced by the Spirit (John 15:1-17), and those who truly love God will keep His commandments (1 John 2:3-6). However, we also know that the thief on the cross believed and lived with Jesus upon his death (Luke 23:42-43 - which is the most amazing display of grace!). Though there are MANY false professions of faith, we must not become so cynical toward the power of the gospel that we question everyone's confession. Yes, if someone claims to be a follower of Christ, we are immediately called to hold them up, admonishing, helping, and encouraging with patience (1 Thess. 5:14). This woman's conversion seemed unlikely, which simply enhanced the glorious act that it was.

In Response to one's self

- **No need of grace – good enough** - Ultimately, self-righteousness glories in the goodness found in our own evaluation, based on our own standards, or ourselves. Simon didn't worship Jesus because he didn't need Him
- **Forgetfulness of the sinfulness of sin** - When we forget what we were, what we are capable of, and what we are saved from, we default to self-righteousness, and fall into the same trap as this Pharisee.

- **Own sin is marginalized, justified** - We become masters of justification, putting different sins in categories, sanitizing some (laziness, selfishness, greed, materialism, pride) and vilifying others (homosexuality, abortion, sexual immorality). When we have a soft hearted response to grace, we want to hate every sin that resides in our hearts and are gracious towards those that reside in others.
- **Think we know better than God** - This is the core of self-righteousness: we believe we don't need God, we have it all wired, and are ourselves gods. Simon trusted his own goodness, wisdom, and work to find salvation, and he was left eternally wanting.

Concluding Thoughts and Questions:

Jesus engaged both Pharisee and Prostitute - Loved both, and even though He knew the Pharisee would reject, He still spent time with him and offered the clear message. He showed patience with both, but one left this meal justified, the other wanting.

What ruts have you found yourself in? What parts of grace have become dissonant to you? What parts of grace have lost their amazement?

What aspects of self-righteous thought do you see in yourself? What parts do you need to confess and turn from?