

LUKE

“Scandalous Grace”

Luke 7:36-50

Sunday, January 28, 2018

By David A. Ritchie

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table. ³⁷ 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. ³⁹ 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. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³ 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.” ⁴⁸ And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” ¹

Heavenly Father, you have revealed yourself to be a God of amazing grace. Your grace is so shocking that it scandalizes minds, yet so powerful that it transforms hearts. May your Spirit cause us to encounter that grace today as we receive your word. We pray this in mighty name of Jesus, our Savior. AMEN.

I. Introduction

It’s Sabbath day in a little town in Galilee.

After a day of worship and rest, one of the local religious leaders holds a feast in honor of the famous guest Rabbi who taught earlier in the morning at the synagogue. Jesus of Nazareth was now nationally known as a mighty teacher and worker of miracles. People would have canceled whatever their plans might be to come and catch a glimpse, share a meal, or even share a moment of conversation with this celebrity.

If it were today, this event would be a type of house party that would occur in a big house in one of the

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 7:36–50.

wealthier neighborhoods in town. Cars would be parked up and down the street, and the front door would be unlocked and open so that guests could come and go as needed. And like a house party in the nicer part of the city, anyone could technically come into the house, but there was a certain unsaid social expectation concerning who this party was for -- and who it wasn't. This event was for the friends and family of the religious leader, as well as the social elite of the city. Other people would have wanted to come, but they knew their place, and they would have never presumed to just barged in.

And it is in this social context that an uninvited woman, who is well known but for all the wrong reasons lets herself in. But more than just coming into the house, the woman then goes straight for the main attraction. She walks up to Jesus, who is eating at the main table. She literally lets down her hair. She pours fragrant oil upon his feet and begins to kiss them as she weeps.

It would be as if the record playing music suddenly scratched and stopped. An awkward silence would have filled the room along with the fragrance. Judging looks toward the woman would ensue. People would have felt sorry and embarrassed for Jesus as a famous Rabbi to be put in this uncomfortable situation.

But if the actions of the woman had shocked the partygoers, the actions of Jesus would soon shock them more. Rather than rebuking, ridiculing, or rejecting the woman, Jesus publically affirms her. He speaks gentle words of kindness to her. And blesses her with one of the Bible's most moving episodes of **"Scandalous Grace."**

II. Text

For the rest of our time today, I'd like to unfold this text by doing character studies of the main three characters in this scene: **1.) The Pharisee, 2.) The Woman, and 3.) The Savior.**

1.) The Pharisee.

- Simon was a respected religious leader in his community. There were certain social standards he had to live up to as a Pharisee. When the rest of the Jewish people were making compromises with the world the Pharisees led a movement to be faithful to the Lord and be distinct as God's people. The Pharisees were standard-bearers of holiness. So Simon was expected to be dignified, respectable, and hold a sense of gravitas.
- But there is more we know about Simon.
- *He was inhospitable to Jesus*²
- We have to understand the cultural norms to understand this
- Hughes unpacks this: "Whatever the reason for Simon's inviting Jesus to dine with him, they were overlaid with a nasty animosity, for Simon purposely omitted the common courtesies accorded any honored dinner guest. Normally the host placed his hand on the guest's shoulder and gave him the kiss of peace. But this was not done for Jesus. Customarily a guest's sandals were removed and his feet were washed when he entered or while he reclined at the table, thus removing the dust of the street and refreshing him. Jesus' feet were left embarrassingly dirty. Dinner guests were also anointed with a touch of olive oil. But there was no such kindness for Jesus. Simon treated Jesus with callous, calculated contempt. He carefully avoided every

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 275.

- custom that would make the Lord feel at home.”³
- The point here is that Simon’s measured kindness and passive coldness are meant to put Jesus in his place.
- Simon is a man who rigorously and diligently observe various external forms of godliness moral virtue, but his heart is cold toward God in flesh who sit before him.
- *He is judgmental toward the woman and Jesus*
- He is sizing everyone up
- He even judges the worship of the woman
- This is the tyranny of legalism and works-based righteousness
- Martin Luther: “Be careful not to measure your holiness by other people’s sins.”
- *For all his spiritual knowledge, he lacks spiritual self-awareness*
- The parable of the debtors is a teaching moment for Simon
- 500 denarii was about a year and a half of an average wage; 50 denarii was about two months⁴
- Both the Pharisee and the woman possess a debt that they cannot pay.⁵
- We too possess a moral debt we cannot pay
- **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, ESV).**
- These words are meant to be smelling salts that awaken us to our spiritual condition outside of Christ. Our indebtedness is the great equalizer of all of humanity.
- So why the pretense? Why not rest in grace?
- Sometimes the social pressure to look moral, righteous, and dignified inoculates us to the need for grace
- He does not know the weight of his sin; therefore, he doesn’t know the worth of the Savior’s love
- It is one thing to mentally know and understand the doctrine of the grace of God
- Maybe you can quote me a verse or a confession or catechism, but is your heart resting in grace? Is your heart moved by grace?
- ***Gratitude is the truest measurement of our heart’s understanding of grace***
- If we understood the debt that was paid, we would not be measured in our worship
- Like King David we would become even more undignified before the presence of the Lord

2.) The Woman.

- In the gospels we often meet people who are identified by their profession: fishermen, tax collectors, Pharisees, and tanner
- The woman of the city is a sinner⁶
- Her sin is her vocation, and as far as the outside world goes, it is her identity

³ Ibid., 275.

⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 237.

⁵ Hughes, 279–280.

⁶ Stein, 236.

- Her identity is shame
 - Imagine her shame. She has been used, abused, sinned with and against; yet she is the one who carries this shame.
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- But somewhere along her journey she encountered Jesus, and Jesus has changed her
 - There are some textual clues in the Greek text that show this most likely isn't her first encounter with Jesus⁷
 - Her life has already been changed by the power of forgiveness and grace
 - She is simply here to say thank you
 - Her love is not the cause of her forgiveness, it is the effect of being forgiven
 - ***Love for Jesus does not earn grace, but it flows from it***
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- *Her love is humble*
 - She postures herself as a servant and slave voluntarily and joyously⁸
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- *Her love is vulnerable*
 - She literally lets down her hair, which for some would have been considered an uncomfortably intimate act
 - It is as if no one is there for her other than Jesus
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- *Her love is costly*
 - The oil she pours out likely cost a year's wage
 - It was a necessary supply for her vocation that made her appealing
 - But she is here literally laying down this emblem of her old life to Jesus
 - This is a great picture of confession
 - Don't ignore your sin, your struggle, or your past
 - Acknowledge your shame, lay it at the feet of Jesus, rest in his grace
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- *Her love is bold*
 - The social shame she would have felt would have been immense
 - But if Jesus approves of her, who cares what anyone else thinks?
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- You may not have noticed this, but isn't it fascinating that the woman says absolutely nothing in this passage⁹
 - She does not need to explain or defend herself
 - Jesus is her vindication
 - He publicly affirms and blesses her
 - Today, if you struggle with shame, Jesus can be your vindication too
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- Some of the greatest saints in history were some of the worst sinners before hand: Paul, Augustine, John Newton

⁷ Ibid., 237.

⁸ Hughes, 277.

⁹ Bock, 218.

- R. Kent Hughes: *“Some people whom we would not touch with a ten-foot pole, if they met Christ, would put us to shame with their fervent love. Such people love much because they have been forgiven much—and they cannot get over it.”*¹⁰

3.) The Savior.

- Jesus reaches out to sinners. This is obviously true of the woman, but it is also just as true of Simon the Pharisee¹¹
- If you have been following the story, it should surprise you that Jesus would be willing to hangout with these guys
- But this is one of three recorded events in the gospel of Luke during which Jesus eats a meal with a Pharisee (Lk. 11:37; 14:1)¹²
- Just because Jesus often rebuked the Pharisees didn't mean that he didn't want to reach out to them. Just because most of his fiercest critics were Pharisees didn't mean he saw them all the same way. The self-righteous religious person needs salvation just as much as those who sin in more obvious, social unacceptable ways.
- Whether the sin is flagrant and social or subtle and self-righteous, sinners need Jesus
- The church cannot affirm sin, but the church must welcome sinners.
- Jesus is a prophet and so much more
- Not only does Jesus know everything about this woman, he knows everything about Simon the Pharisee – including his judgmental thoughts about Jesus
- Even more shocking Jesus presumes to be able to pronounce forgiveness
- Only the priest could do such a thing, and this was after a blood sacrifice
- Jesus does this because he is the One to whom the debt is owed
- He is God
- Also, Jesus does this because he is the one who pay the debt himself
- He will die for the shame of the woman and the self-righteousness of the Pharisee
- Who are we in the story? We are either Simon or the woman. Let us be the people who at the feet of Jesus.
- I'll conclude with this from Darrell Bock: *“It is Jesus, not us, who has the right to forgive sin. He is the one who calls the heart to change. We as believers serve and point to him. Any righteousness we possess comes because he has worked in our lives. We have not earned it, but received it because of his grace. We are all in the position of the woman at Jesus' feet. We*

¹⁰ Hughes, 280–281.

¹¹ “Jesus displayed no reticence in accepting the invitation; the fact that he was especially interested in despised people did not mean that he was uninterested in the more respectable members of society; they too needed the gospel.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 308.

¹² Stein, 235.

must never forget that truth, so we can show to others the way to his feet.¹³

Community Group Discussion Questions

- 1) *Simon the Pharisee had invited Jesus to his home, but he intentionally withheld common courtesies of hospitality that his culture would have expected (such as offering a servant to wash his feet and anoint him with fragrant oil). Simon wanted Jesus to entertain his guests, but he did not want to welcome him or show him any affection. In what ways do we relate with Jesus, but only on our terms?*
- 2) *Do we have limits on showing our affection for Jesus for the sake of respectability? If so, why?*
- 3) *The unnamed woman expresses love and gratitude toward Jesus with humility, vulnerability, lavishness, and boldness. In what ways do her actions paint a picture of biblical worship? How might the Lord be calling you to a deeper worship?*
- 4) *What motivates the woman in her love for Jesus? What should motivate our worship?*
- 5) *How does this passage show that both the Pharisee and the woman are in the same category? What does this show us about our need for grace?*

¹³ Bock, 224.