

A Lesson in Worship from a Sinful Woman

Luke 7:36-38

So you want to turn over to Luke chapter 7 and verse 36. we're going to see some lessons in this text on worshiping and loving our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Look at Luke 7:36 and following. "One of the Pharisees asked him, asked Jesus, to, to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that she was, that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 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.

"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 man, woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.' And Jesus answering said to him,

'Simon, I have something to say to you,' And he answered, 'Say it, Teacher.' 'A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, the other fifty. And when they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

"Simon answered, 'The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.' And he said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' And then turning to 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she had anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.' And he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' Then those who were at the table with them began to say among themselves, 'Who is this, who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'"

It's a remarkable and instructive text. It's a confrontive text. We need to receive that confrontation and enter into this section of Scripture with a heart of reflection, a heart willing to self-examine, to think about ourselves and the measure, the degree, the fervor, the passion of our own love for Jesus Christ.

Luke is here showing us what the true nature, what the true character of a true disciple looks like and he uses the least likely of people to illustrate. We're only going to look at how Luke has set the scene for us in verses 36-38. The way he has set the scene is by introducing us to a true worshiper. First point, an ungracious host and a hostile situation, an ungracious host, and a hostile situation.

As Jesus sits down to eat with, frankly, an ungracious host, as he enters into a hostile situation, you might see on the one hand that this points to his confidence and his courage to enter into a situation like this. But it especially points to the indiscriminate way that Jesus loved all kinds of sinners. He knowingly entered into hostile company. And he endured shabby treatment that he might teach all these people about love.

Look at verse 36. It says, "One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table." You might say, "Well, that doesn't seem very hostile. Kind of innocuous." And as Luke relayed the story, the true intentions of the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner, they are somewhat hidden from us in this introductory verse. But as we read the entire text, in verses 44-46, we learned later this man didn't provide even the most basic, the customary culturally appropriate expressions of courtesy or politeness.

No water to wash his feet. It's important in a dusty area where you're wearing sandals, open-toed shoes and dust and dirt and filth gets in there. No water to wash his feet. No greeting of friendship, no anointing oil. And the absence of those things, for any First Century reader and especially First Century Middle Eastern reader, is absolute shock. How could you do that to a guest? It's a shocking oversight and it is a clear and obvious insult. Jesus, on walking through the door, he knew where he stood with this man. He knew the nature of this dinner invitation.

This guy invites Jesus over to his home for a meal. And Jesus knows exactly what he's gonna face. By hosting a visiting rabbi, the host had an opportunity to put his, his own hospitality and wealth on display. He also had an occasion to get his own questions answered, to interact with a well-educated guest and even engage in a bit of intellectual sparring.

In this case, the Pharisee doesn't even have those purposes ultimately in mind. He has a less noble purpose in his head, revealed by his thoughts in verse 39. "If this man were a prophet," but he's not, then he would've known." That expression, that verbal expression is called a second-class conditional sentence in the Greek. That is to say, that that Pharisee begins with a negative assumption, namely, that Jesus is a prophet. He says, No, he's not a prophet. That's what he's thinking. He doesn't believe Jesus is a prophet.

And so he's invited Jesus over to his house to look for evidence of that fact. And as we see at the very first opportunity, he thinks that he finds what his unbelief is looking for: Evidence that this man is not a prophet. So it's a hostile situation. Jesus is walking into an ambush, and he knows

it. So again, setting the scene, Luke introduces us to, second point, an uninvited guest with a notorious reputation. Notice verse 37. It begins, "And behold." Some translations leave out that word, behold, but they shouldn't do that because that word is important here. Luke wants to signal to us, and he wants us to enter into the scene and he wants us to see how the sudden arrival of this woman is surprising, is shocking. Frankly, she's unwanted.

Look at what it says there. "Behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and stood behind him," and let's stop there. This woman hasn't been invited but she comes anyway. How did that happen?

In Jesus' day homes are more open. Dinners were enjoyed in community with other people. Hosts were hospitable. They were accommodating even to strangers. Larger homes like this one that the Pharisee owned had an opened courtyard area. It was kind of shaped like a "U" with rooms and private places on the side, but then in the middle, more of a courtyard setting. And then that

allowed people entrance into the courtyard area and even access to some of the common spaces. Private bedroom, bathing rooms, all those things were obviously considered off limits. But common spaces like dining areas were much more open.

Yes, there was a risk, maybe, that some bold beggar might also draw near to the table, which sometimes happened, but it wasn't common. There may not have been physical walls to keep unsavory riffraff away, but there were social walls. And those social walls were sometimes more impenetrable than a physical wall. Cultural stigma of being poor, of begging, these people were pushed to the outsides. They were ostracized. They were disdained. So it was really only the bold and the really, really poor, those with no pride left to preserve who might show up and beg.

So here's a woman who's coming in and she's ignored social expectations. She has breached etiquette here and she has come to the dinner party as an uninvited guest. And worse than that, not only was she uninvited, she came into this setting, into the scene carrying with her a notoriously bad reputation. Coming to this party, at this Pharisee's house without an invitation

certainly isn't going to improve her public image. It would just reinforce the poor opinion people already had about her. Look at her, shameful, audacious. Did you see what she did?

The text says there in verse 37, literal translation here, "And behold, a woman, which was in the city a sinner." She could've been known as a sinner for any number of sins. It could have been fraud, theft, trafficking in illegal goods, unpaid parking tickets, whatever it was. But the way that Luke has written this here, it appears to be a delicate way of portraying the nature of her sin without being explicit about it.

This woman, as far as we can tell, has been engaging in the oldest profession, an illegal profession, degrading way to make a living. Luke mutes the emphasis on her sin, the nature of her sin, to avoid painting an entirely wrong picture of what's about to happen. Because she's about to be portrayed here in a moment, as engaging in what may be misinterpreted by prurient minds. But Luke does not want us getting any impression whatsoever that all, any of her actions could be interpreted in any other way but as decent and wholesome in nature. There's nothing indecent about her and what she does in this text.



So in setting the scene, Luke wants us to understand what kind of woman she is. He doesn't want us to see her as doing anything sinful in this scene. She's coming here with pure intentions, which is, you know, admittedly, probably a new thing for her. But pure motives, nonetheless. She comes to the Pharisee's house, as it says in verse 37, "Because she knew Jesus would be there." If this is located in Capernaum, which is likely, then this woman has not only heard about Jesus, she has heard Jesus. And what I mean by that is that she has really heard him.

She heard him say, or at least heard the report of him saying in Luke 6:20, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Her profession wasn't making her rich, financially, socially or in any other way. It wasn't making her rich. She knows she's poor, not just in her bank account. She knows she's poor in spirit and she longs for true riches from God, immeasurable bounty of God's kingdom.

This sinful woman heard Jesus say, Luke 6:21, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied." No matter how she got into her illicit profession, no matter what started her into a sinful lifestyle, she'd long since discovered how utterly empty it was, how utterly, totally dissatisfying it was. All she could feel now was this gnawing emptiness of her soul, a spiritual hunger for righteousness, for holiness, which she knew she didn't have.

The social exclusion of this woman, what she'd experienced, it was all her own doing. She was the cause of her own stigma. She was to blame. Yes, you might say, Oh, well a culture that has this, this institution of prostitution, that's the problem. It's an institutional issue. No, no, she bears personal responsibility for her decisions within the institutional issues. She's the cause of her own stigma. She's to blame and she knows it.

She was considered unclean. Why? Because she was unclean. But now, to hear that the Son of Man himself would call her to identify with him, to be shunned and excluded and hated, no longer for her own sake, but now for his name's sake. No longer

because of her sin, but because of his name. This is something entirely new. This sinful woman's heart had been opened to Jesus Christ and to his blessed gospel. She'd been listening. She'd been watching. She'd been learning and finally, for the first time in her life, she has found someone who's able to look beyond her public image. He's able to see her sinfulness, but he's also able to see through her sinfulness. Wonder of wonders, he is willing to love her anyway.

Not only that, but he has the power and the will to save her soul, to rescue her from the degrading imprisonment to sin. After all, as she'd known, he was willing and able to deliver a demon possessed man. The greatest power of the spiritual realm had to yield and bow to the power of Jesus Christ. He had the power to make a paralytic walk, power to restore a withered limb, even to raise the dead.

So this woman of the city who was a sinner. When she learned that Jesus was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she came. Oh, she came. Why did she come? What was her motive? Luke shows us her intentions at the end of verse 37 and beginning of verse 38. It says that she "brought an alabaster

flask of ointment and stood behind him at his feet.” So an alabaster was a tiny vial to carry contained perfumed oil.

It was common in that day for woman to wear an alabaster vial of perfumed oil around their necks. The viscous oil was used as a bit of a lotion for soothing and treating dry skin in the environment in the climate there. Then mixed with this pungent perfume, it also masked any unpleasant smells. Showering was not a daily luxury in those days, so a woman’s alabaster vial of perfumed ointment helped maintain feminine dignity.

For this woman, her alabaster vial was necessary, in plying her trade. And now, what had been a means of facilitating her impure vocation, this perfume became a means now of honoring and worshiping the one who had delivered her from her impurity. So having nothing of her person worth bringing to Jesus, she brings what she thinks is the only gift she can bring, this alabaster flask of ointment. She came intending to put it to honorable use for the very first time in her life. And, she’s so intent on coming to him, she’s decided to push past all social barriers. She has decided to break through the invisible, but very firm

walls at the Pharisee's house so that she might worship Jesus as her Savior. She will not be dissuaded. She will not be deterred.

This brings us to a third point. Number three, an undaunted sinner and her humble veneration. Again, verse 37 says that she brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and then this, verse 38, "And standing behind him as 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."

Perhaps she's crying because she's remembering all that she's been forgiven for. And there's an admixture here of sorrow and joy, of sadness and great happiness. She's a woman who senses profoundly the joy and the freedom of forgiven sin. She's shedding tears of, of gladness as she has finally been redeemed. And yet these precious tears are used in a most common of ways, to wash the dust and the dirt and the muck from Jesus' unwashed feet. Her hair becomes the towel that dries them.

And then before she anoints his feet with that perfumed ointment, she uses another of her most tender and sensitive

parts. She uses her lips to kiss his feet. And the imperfect tense of the verb there tells us that she's kissing his feet repeatedly, over and over and over and over again. And get this, again, Jesus does not stop her. He lets her continue in front of all those people.

Look, when we stop to consider whose feet she is washing with her tears, whose feet she's drying with her hair, and kissing with her lips, we come to recognize that she is using the most tender parts of her body in this way employing her hair, which is her glory, to appropriately show her gratitude and to serve this act of praise and worship.

Have you ever stopped to consider how the thrones of monarchs are lifted up above the people? It's to give a spatial impression of royal distinction, that there is a difference between this monarch on the throne and you down below the throne. They, high and lifted up, and us, lowly and humble before them. And from our low position, when we lift our eyes up to see royalty above us, you know what the first thing we see is? The monarch's feet.

That's why we see over and over in the gospels people falling at Jesus' feet, worshiping him and he does not lift them up and drive them away. He accepts their worship. That's what's so over-the-top exemplary about this precious woman. The fact that she has enough good sense, or perhaps we should say she has the instinctive sensitivity to offer up her most delicate aspects of her feminine tenderness of her beauty, of her glory.

She uses her tears and her hair and her lips no longer for sin but now as instruments of righteousness to express heartfelt devotion and sincere worship to Jesus Christ. With her tears, she washes the Lord's feet. With the hair of her head, she dries the Lord's feet. She uses her lips to kiss repeatedly, affectionately. Kiss, it's an intensive verb in the Greek. It's not just *phileo*, which can mean, to love like a friendship love, or to kiss, give a greeting. This is *kataphileo*, to kiss fervently, tenderly, affectionately.

When she anointed the feet of Jesus with this costly perfumed ointment, she did not come to worship without

sacrifice. She didn't come to worship without cost, without fervor. This woman, she's all in. If you can find me a better example of how to worship Jesus Christ than what this woman offered, you're gonna have to show it to me and prove it to me. This woman has set a precedent. It's one of the most sincere, most tender, most affectionate demonstrative acts of worship in the entire New Testament. And so much so that we find Mary, the sister of Lazarus, the sister of Martha, we find her repeating the same act.

Mary, her act recorded in Matthew 26:7 or Mark 14:3 or John 12:3, her act of doing this to Jesus' feet, it's preceded by this woman here doing it first. This woman, who's redeemed by God, this woman, who's forgiven by Jesus Christ and I think it's precious. I think it's beautiful that Mary would later show solidarity with this unnamed woman, this notoriously, formerly sinful woman. Mary counts this woman as a sister in redemption. Both of them, unworthy sinners saved by his magnanimous grace.

What about you? What about me? Would we identify with this woman, bowing humbly at the feet of Jesus Christ? We should. Or would we prefer to sit around the more educated respectable



people of the table, judging, casting aspersions, looking down on the sinners? If we've been forgiven, we know this woman's heart. We should bow and do likewise. The true worshiper, it's not the one with all the knowledge. It's not the one with all the answers. The true worshiper is not the most zealous, the most put together, the one who gives the most. It's not the one who does the most.

All those external, superficial standards are what the world uses to designate someone as a true and sincere and educated and successful, whatever, fill in the blank. Even in the church, those are marks that set apart people to say, That's a true believer. But while it's true that there is an increase of holiness and maturity, of dignity and grace, of knowledge and understanding in God as true worshipers. The true worshiper in God's estimation is the one who stoops low to the ground to honor his beloved son. Like us, this woman is one who's been forgiven much, which means she loves much, which means she worships and honors Christ in an exemplary way.

Our Father, when we see this woman, we really want to fall from our seats onto our knees, laying low on the floor because

we're not worthy to untie the sandals from the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, we, who are the least in the kingdom of God, you've caused us to draw near to Jesus, to worship at his feet, and take our place behind this dear woman. The great Apostle Paul counted himself to be the chief of sinners and he wondered at your mercy and grace. And Father it was that profound sense of gratitude that fueled his love for Christ that motivated his service unto Christ for your glory to offer you a life of worship. May we like Paul, may we like this woman, Father, go and do likewise. For your glory in Christ's name, we pray, Amen.