

***The Gospel of Luke,  
a Theological Application to our Lives***

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**Luke 7:36-50. Simon the Pharisee ≠ The Woman at Jesus' Feet**

<sup>36</sup> A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, so he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. <sup>37</sup> A sinful woman in the city learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup> she placed herself at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he thought to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner."

<sup>40</sup> Jesus said to him in reply, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. <sup>41</sup> "Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty. <sup>42</sup> Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?"

<sup>43</sup> Simon said in reply, "The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven."

He said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then he turned to the woman but said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since I entered. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." <sup>48</sup> He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

<sup>49</sup> The others at table said to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

<sup>50</sup> But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (≈ NAB)

**Observations:**

- *reclining* at table to dine
- a woman: Luke is a ladies' man. He begins the gospel with prominent ladies, Elizabeth and Mary; the widow Anna, daughter of Fanuel of the tribe of Asher, in the temple; Herodias, who slept around with the Herod boys; the widow of Nain at her son's funeral (7:11-17); Magdalene, Joanna, Herod's steward Chuza's wife; Susanna, among the benefactresses of the college; Martha and Mary (10:38-42); the hunchback lady, eighteen years bent over (13:10-17); the widow with the two coins who offers the substance of her life, a Christological photo that anticipates Jesus' offering of his life on the cross for us; the ladies at Golgotha; the ladies in the cemetery on the morning of the first day of the New Creation; then, in Acts of the Apostles,

the lovely Tabitha-Dorcas, and her clothing and fashion industry, known for her virtue, among others.

- The “alabaster flask, evidently this prominent woman who crashed the Simon’s dinner part was not living on food stamps.
- The feet of Jesus: this lady, the former Gerasene demoniac (8:35); Jairus the synagogue official (8:41); Mary, Martha’s sister (10:39); an ex-Samaritan leper (17:16); proof of the resurrected body of Jesus (24:39-40);
- The woman’s hair (2xs mentioned) adds a sensual tint to the scene: in Rev 9:8 the locusts look like horses, but have women’s hair and lions’ teeth; Peter in his letter warns against fussing too much with the hair (1 Pet 3:3); Paul writes to a society where respectable Christian women should cover their heads, so as not to be confused with the Corinthian sex servers (1 Cor 11:5, 10).
- Jesus looks at the woman at his feet while he addresses Simon by name
- Simon is reluctant to recognize himself in the mirror; he glares at the intrusive, repentant sinner and says categorically: “That’s not who I am.”
- In the parable, both persons owe a debt

Simon, an upright, law-abiding Pharisee, missed no opportunity to defend the law, pay the temple tax, and uphold the Jewish customs. At the end of the day he balanced his accounts and only looked at the column of credits. Cautious about the company he kept, judicious about whom he invited, Simon furnished his public life with polite, like-minded “glitterati”, who hosted him when it was their turn. Even so, the exquisite host, ostensibly concerned for propriety and decorum, questioned his guests’ moral stature –his criticism of Jesus goes right to the heart: “If this man were really a prophet, he would mind what sort of company he kept–, Simon judged his table companions, and excluded certain “unworthies” from social life.

Simon was on familiar terms with Jesus, who responded graciously, relaxed, and accepted the invitation to recline at his table. Did “familiarity breed contempt”? The host, ostensibly cozy with Jesus, held his guest at a distance, and neglected the customary gestures of hospitality. I wonder if Simon expected some of the glitter of his guest to fall on him. Was his social status enhanced by hosting such a prophet? Did he hope for some miracle? A stroll across the swimming pool? Water to wine? Embellish this soirée and receive honorable mention in the Galilean Gazette? Or were Jesus and Simon just casual friends meant to relax in each other’s company?

The only glitch was when *that woman*, a reputable sinner, barged in and burst Simon's bubble. We suspect she was a prostitute, another spoke in the wheel of corruption in Capernaum. In Simon's discriminating eye, she's riffraff, making her living in shabby, sleazy ways. Yet, as Luke reports, this sinner was not the cold, hard-hearted schemer who trampled on God and neighbor to get what she wanted and coddle her way up the ladder. She longed to be free from the constricting web of sin that shamed her.

Simon, reclining, wining, and dining, engaged in lively conversation with his celebrity guest-prophet, sunning himself in the glow of the perfect evening...

...until she showed up. A floozy? I wonder that there was no fuss when she entered the home. Had she visited before in less celebrated, more intimate moments? Perhaps even the mistress of the house and the servants were used to her comings and goings, and it seemed only slightly amiss that she would show up on that evening when Simon was basking in the limelight of his show piece. Why, perhaps that very afternoon Simon had politely excused himself, whispering to her, "Not tonight, Honey. I'm having a quiet evening at home, expecting a few friends over."

But, unfortunately for Simon, this is not the type who conducts her business in private and gets paid to keep her mouth shut. She'd heard of Jesus and wants what only he can offer, so she barges in and, once at Jesus' feet, weeps and wipes up her tears with her hair, then massages the feet with precious perfume. Insulted, the parsimonious host, assesses the prophet's credentials, questions his perspicacity, faults him for failing to read the hearts of such low life, for not being more discriminating in his company. Meanwhile, Jesus, the clairvoyant, takes an electrocardiogram (EKG), of Simon's heart.

So, finally, Simon and the woman meet on official grounds. Jesus gazes at the nameless lady at his feet and addresses his host across the table, "Simon." Note the scene. The two change places; Jesus deftly identifies her with his host, and one might ask, had the Pharisee ever been in her slippers? Had Simon, once flooded with emotion and religious zeal, unabashedly approached God, wept, and emptied the perfume of his heart in a fervent, fresh conversion?

Jesus tells a parable (vv. 41.42): "Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty." <sup>42</sup> Since

they were unable to pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Which of them will love him more?”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a striking parable, and the details just don’t happen in life and society. In the real world, pawnbrokers and loan sharks are neither heroes nor beloved. There was always something shady about them. And so the parable starts out. But the audience quickly guesses that this is about God—even in the Our Father we pray (in Matthew’s version, 6,12), “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Moreover, in the Our Father and other biblical texts that appeal to God’s mercy nothing is held back: the *whole* debt is forgiven unconditionally. Given the context the story of the sinful woman or, more broadly, the historical context of Jesus’ treatment of sinners—it had to dawn on the hearers: he is talking about God! That had to happen when Jesus added the question: “Which of them will love him more?”

Do any of us really love pawnbrokers, even if they forgive our debts? It is difficult to speak in terms of “love.” We may be surprised, uncertain, confused, shamed, moved, or grateful. But love? No way! The word “love” creates a different set of associations, above all our love for God. After all, Jesus’ audience spoke the “Hear, O Israel” from Deuteronomy 6 every day: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

With the word “love,” this parable is raised to another level. Now it is clear to everybody that the shady moneylender was really God, who—as Jesus’ dealings with sinners demonstrates—forgives all guilt, all debts. Just as the moneylender is suddenly no longer a moneylender, so before God human debts, human sins, are no longer debts, no longer sins, but opportunities for grace. For those who come to Jesus and believe the Gospel, all debt is forgiven.

Now, in Simon’s case, something happened along the way, the vitality of his “Good Zeal that separates from evil and leads to God” had grown stale. The fervent glow of his faith grown cold, his friendship with God had formalized, hardened into routine. Now that Simon had clamored up the rungs of acceptable society, he championed propriety among his peers, who might be quick to discriminate and “cold-shoulder” him if he were to give a fresh show of that youthful zeal. Simon measured his friendship with God by the standard of custom

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gerhard Lohfink, *The Forty Parables of Jesus* (Liturgical Press Academic, Collegeville, 2021), 73-74.

and law, which required upholding certain social standards, and sin and sinfulness is swept under the carpet.

As Jesus addresses Simon across the table, he gazes at the sinner at his feet, so filled with her desperate condition, corroded with contradiction, her only recourse was run and hide ... or turn herself in. So, she did. She found Jesus where she would expect to find him: in the homes of “decent” people, the sinners without overt flaws.

Gentle Listeners, Let’s not be too hard on righteous, dependable Simon, a pillar of the community. After all, Jesus, relaxing in his tidy, well-kept home, is his personal acquaintance. But neither was Jesus a stranger to the woman. She’d heard of him; perhaps she had once been close to him. But then she strayed, and because of the business of growing up, a hasty marriage and painful divorce, raising the kids, a demanding job, social pressure, the hypocrisy she perceived in organized religion, and pious people, this woman had distanced herself from “church” for a while.

*Gentle Listeners, Consider the bipolar challenge in this gospel. Simon is that brittle part of me that invests in securities and appearances. The person at Jesus’ feet is that fresh, sensitive person in me ready to repent. Assess the two, one bolstered by the observance and propriety; the other, frank with her prayer and friendship with God. Assess these polar regions in the heart. How do you read yourself in this x-ray?*

Once a person comes to know the self, he’s less likely to judge, more likely to tolerate the infirmities of body and behavior (RB 72.5) of the neighbor. He’s likely to treat others with the same patient tolerance and compassion that he received from God.

Luke has in mind his own community that undoubtedly included “Pharisees,” Christians, who looked askance at the new converts of a dubious past. The gospel also targets our community of the Pharisees as well as persons of a questionable past.

It often happens that persons who have gotten out of “dead-end streets” in life are apt to show greater compassion to their fellows. Their kindness is a grateful expression of the mercy they received. Whoever experiences forgiveness as freedom from the past is often capable of tolerating the sinful neighbor. He doesn’t distance himself from sinners because he’s conscious of the unmerited pardon

received. But it's not always so. Sometimes the mixture of conversion and forgetfulness breed a new form of Pharisaism.

Gentle Listener, conversion is a salient theme in Luke, from the Magnificat, the preaching of the Baptist, and throughout the gospel. Basically, conversion, *meta-noia*, has two faces. The radical conversion, like that of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, when one's thinking and attitude are fundamentally altered. One converts to a radical change in understanding life, that has its effects in day to day living. This sometimes happens at the beginning of our spiritual journey in life.

The other face of conversion is the Benedictine vow of lifelong process of *conversatio morum*, conversion woven into the warp and woof of the first, attending to the details, attitudinal and behavioral fine tuning, putting our lives in harmony with Christ and the symphony of the Paschal mystery.

*What place does conversion have for me now in my life? In what ways am I called to conversion, a change of attitude, that is reflected in a change of behavior?*

**Let us prefer nothing to the Love of Christ. May God bring us all together to everlasting life.**