

Two Sinners *Luke 7:36-50*

The banquet was ready. And the windows were thrown open to catch the night air. But the orange lamp light that flickered in windows far below was not Capernaum. The Master's host was sure the Carpenter did not know a woman who wandered into the hall. At Capernaum, Christ would have been sure to know her.

Our Savior had been slandered for dining with tax collectors and open sinners. And the charge was true. But those sinners were not the only ones our Lord ate with.

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. Verse 36

It was a curious custom of the day. Uninvited guests were allowed to attend private dinners and sit along the wall to listen to the conversation. But that night, one woman did not come to listen.

And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, Verse 37

Jesus came to the Pharisee's house as an invited guest. But His host did not even offer Him basic courtesies.

In that day, people wore sandals. Streets were dusty. And feet could not help but get dirty by the time guests reached a banquet.

So the host would order a servant to wash his guests' feet when they arrived. But this Pharisee did not do that for Jesus.

I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, Verse 44

Today we greet someone by shaking hands. Then men greeted one another with a formal kiss on the cheek. But the Pharisee did not do that, either.

You gave Me no kiss; Verse 45

Finally, guests were anointed with scented olive oil. But once again, the Pharisee did not offer Christ that kindness.

You did not anoint My head with oil, Verse 46

It is not really a question of if. All too often, only when and why. Worship becomes cold and praise perfunctory? Church services become a waste of time and prayer a bother?

A glimpse of this evening banquet shows us why that happens.

Presumption

The Pharisee frowned when he saw the woman slip shyly through the door. She was not merely a Jewess who never bothered to attend Sabbath services at the synagogue.

She was much more than merely a sinner. Sin was her chosen profession. Perhaps she was a prostitute who lured sailors who lounged around the docks into her bedroom.

She was a stranger to the synagogue. But Jesus did not limit His teaching to Sabbath services. He spoke in noisy marketplaces, too.

Sometime or other, the woman stopped to listen to Him. His words warmed her soul. And when the Master looked across the crowd into her eyes and said she could be forever forgiven of all her sins, she believed Him.

So when she heard Jesus was a dinner guest of a proud Pharisee, she hurried down the dark streets across town. She knew she was risking more than mere disdain. But still she came and slipped through the door, hoping she would not be noticed.

She came with a rare alabaster vial of expensive perfume. She planned to anoint the Lord who had forgiven her. But when she saw Jesus, she was overwhelmed by a flood of emotion.

...she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. Verses 37-38

The woman did everything the Pharisee had not. And we are left with a stark contrast Christ Himself pointed out.

But why, that is the question. Why did the Pharisee fail to honor Jesus as a this woman of the streets did with such deep emotion?

Our Lord said love and forgiveness made the difference.

...he who is forgiven little, loves little. Verse 47

But why had the Pharisee experienced so little forgiveness? It could not be that he was so pure and perfect and had so few sins he needed but little of God's grace. No, the reason rests in a foolish presumption that man made.

The Pharisee was shocked when the woman poured perfume on the Carpenter's feet. And when she wept and wiped His feet with her hair, he was aghast.

But he was also warmed by a smug, secret assumption. People everywhere were saying Jesus was prophet. Now, the Pharisee was convinced he had hard evidence that was a myth.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." Verse 39

Like most of us, the Pharisee assumed other people saw things just as he did. And he would never allow a notorious sinner to touch him. It would defile his spiritual purity.

But Jesus did allow a woman to do just that. So He could not possibly be a prophet, the Pharisee concluded. If He was, He would know that what kind of person this woman was.

The Pharisee was wrong, of course. Jesus not only knew what kind of person she was. He also knew all the dark details of her sins: how many and what kind. He could even read her secret motives and private thoughts.

Our Savior had the same insight with the Pharisee. And He sees you and me just as clearly. That is one reason why the Pharisee had been forgiven for so few of his sins.

He assumed Christ could not see his hidden words and thoughts and deeds. And God's Word warns us about believing that.

Woe to those who deeply hide their plans from the Lord, and whose deeds are done in a dark place, and they say, "Who sees us?" or "Who knows us?" Ezekiel 8:12

There is no place in all the universe where we are hidden from the all-seeing eye of our Creator. He hears every word we say. He reads our every thought. And He witnesses every sinful, selfish act we commit.

Fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? Psalm 94:8-9 (ESV)

Our secret sins are not secret at all. God knows all about them. And it is more than merely foolish to believe our Lord does not see our sins. It can also be fatal.

After all, we cannot confess our sins and hide them at the same time. And without confession, there can be no forgiveness.

Pride

People did not sit in chairs at the table in the Roman world. They reclined on couches. So the Savior's feet pointed back toward the door. So when the woman stood behind Him, she was at His feet.

Among the Jews, anointing feet was a way to honor respected Rabbis. And that was the woman's plan.

But when she saw the Lord who had forgiven her, a tidal wave of emotion swept over her. She thought of all the sordid, shameful things she had done. She remembered the pain in her mother's eyes and the disgust on the faces of people in the street.

She had learned to hate what she did and loathe what she was. But then she met the Master. And in a moment, He cleansed her conscience of every word, every deed, and every ugly attitude.

She was finally and forever clean. And joy filled her eyes with tears as she knelt down at Jesus' feet. The Pharisee was too proud to wash Christ's feet, just as the disciples would be too proud to wash one another's feet later in the upper room.

But this woman was not. She was more than willing to serve the Savior as a slave. She was overjoyed to do so.

The Pharisee met the Master face to face, as an equal. But this woman felt unworthy to do anything but fall down at His feet.

She was not afraid of what people might think of her, either. She felt free to fully express her love and gratitude to the One who had delivered her from the darkness, death and despair of sin.

No one knew better than she did how dark and despicable her sins were. They were an ocean not a pond. And now they were gone.

Jesus told a parable to answer the Pharisee's hidden thoughts about both himself and the woman on her knees at His feet. And His story illustrates an important, spiritual principle.

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

And he replied, "Say it, Teacher."

"A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more."

And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." Verses 40- 43

That is the Master's message. If we realize just how utterly sinful we really are, we will confess ourselves as such to the Savior.

However, if we indulge the illusion that we are not really all that bad, we will not. So we will not experience the full impact of the Savior's sacrifice for us on the cross.

We will look upon ourselves as having received just a little forgiveness. That little, we will suppose, is all we need.

So our gratitude to the Savior who bled and died for us will always be overshadowed and overpowered by our pride.

And worship will be reduced to an empty ritual.

Propitiation

The woman did not come to have her sins forgiven. They had already been forgiven. That is clear from what Jesus said.

I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” Then He said to her, “Your sins have been forgiven.” Verses 47-48

The word for in that verse really means therefore. The intensity of the woman’s emotion and the sincerity of her love were ample evidence she had experienced Christ’s forgiveness. And the cold, callous disregard the Pharisee had for our Lord proves he had not.

But the reason went beyond his hidden sins and his proud spirit. He also knew no forgiveness because of his concept of Christ.

Jesus assured the woman that she need not fret at the Pharisee’s contempt and harsh words. She really was forgiven. And hearing our Savior say that irritated the Pharisee all the more.

Then He said to her, “Your sins have been forgiven.” Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this man who even forgives sins?” Verses 48-49

Of course, this was not the first time Jesus enraged Pharisees by extending forgiveness to a sinner. In Peter’s house at Capernaum, He said the same thing to a paralytic.

The Pharisees who were present that day considered Christ’s words blasphemy. And they were not too shy to say so.

Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone? Mark 2:7

Those Pharisees were right, of course. God is the only One who can forgive sin. And that is precisely what Jesus was and is and ever shall be. God robed in human flesh.

In the end, that was the real problem. Like the Pharisees at Peter’s house, the dinner host and his friends considered Jesus just another man like themselves.

But if Jesus was just another man, He could not have lived a perfect life. And sacrifices for sin had to be without spot or blemish.

So Christ could not have been what the Baptist said He was: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He would be just another sinful man, unworthy and unfit to pay for our sins.

And that is not all. Only God Himself is strong enough to bear all the horror and heartache of every sin human beings have ever committed.

More than that, only the Son of God could have come back from the grave. And Paul wrote that if Jesus never rose up from among the dead, both faith and forgiveness are myths.

...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 1 Corinthians 15:17

The Pharisee was a fool of the first order. But he is not alone in his foolishness.

Many people today agree with him. Yes, they say, Jesus was great teacher and a good man. But that was all He was.

The Pharisee was a lot like another Pharisee Jesus saw praying in the shadows beside a stone pillar on the temple courtyard one day. He believed he was connected to God and on his way to Heaven.

He walked away from the temple down the steps to the busy streets below sure he was right with God and Heaven awaited him on the other side of death. But he was tragically and eternally mistaken.

If we would be saved, we must believe Jesus is the sinless Son of God who died on a cross to pay for our sins. If we stop short of that we are deeper in darkness than the vilest sinner.

We are so lost, we do not even realize it. And while we might claim to love God, we are deceiving ourselves.

Love for God flows from gratitude. Only when we know we are like Paul, the chief of sinners, and only when we confess both our sins and our sinfulness to the Christ as the Son of God who died for us are we really forgiven.

And only when we are completely cleansed of all our sins will we love God as we should, as we must if we are to serve Him.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. Matthew 22:37-38

That is why worship is false and formal, rigid and ritual, empty and impotent. There is no power in our praise, because we do not love God with all our hearts.

And we do not love Him, because we have not been fully forgiven.