

Luke 7:36-50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 7 verses 36 to 50. One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. 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, 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 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, and the other fifty.

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 a larger debt. And he said to him, You have judged rightly.

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.

[1 : 1 9] 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 has 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 table with him 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.

In Luke chapter 7, Jesus has been accused of eating with tax collectors and sinners. And in the next and final scene of the chapter, he's eating with a Pharisee.

There's some humour and irony here, I suspect. This passage juxtaposes Simon, the Pharisee and the woman. Perhaps we should see another of Luke's male-female pairs here again.

[2 : 1 7] It's similar to an event recorded in Matthew, Mark and John in the final couple of weeks of Jesus' life. There it is Mary of Bethany, who seems to be a member of the dinner party, rather than a sinful woman who's seemingly intruding upon the feast.

In those passages, the focus is upon preparing Jesus for his burial. That's the significance of the event. The outrage is caused by the costliness of the ointment, not by the character of the woman.

And the story is there closely connected with the passion narrative in each account. It seems to me then that in addition to the fact that this is found at a very different part of the story, we are justified in saying it is not the same event, as that recorded in Matthew, Mark and John.

Simon, Jesus' host, is a Pharisee. We often see Pharisees simply as the bad guys, but their identity is rather more complicated and nuanced. Some Pharisees were faithful.

In Acts chapter 15 verse 5, we discover that there were some early Christians who also belonged to the Pharisees, even as Christians. The apostle Paul calls himself a Pharisee before the council, even after his conversion.

[3 : 23] Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.

That's Acts chapter 23 verse 6. Now Paul, to use a modern term, is clearly trolling the council here, trying to excite differences among them. But there is no reason to believe that his statement is not true on this account.

Simon could have been a fair-minded person who still had to make his mind up on Jesus. And he seems, in part, to be inviting Jesus to this feast for this reason, to discover his true character.

Jesus seems to address him as someone who is, at least to some degree, open to what he is saying. Identity as a Pharisee does seem to be an important part of the framing of the story though. The Pharisees challenged Jesus as a party for the most part.

For a reason. As Jesus unsettled a number of their distinctive emphases and concerns. The Pharisee concerned for ritual purity, for instance, is an important part of this story.

[4 : 26] As it is unsettled by Jesus' teaching of radical forgiveness. And what that means in the treatment of the woman. Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus for a meal. And he seems, as we read the beginning of this account, to be a generous host.

An upstanding religious man of the city. But then a woman of the city. A known sinner. Comes into the group. It would seem that she has not been invited. She is described in a way that would suggest that she is a prostitute.

And what happens next is nothing short of scandalous. Not just to the Pharisees. But to practically anyone within that society. She lets down her hair. She wets his feet with her tears.

She wipes them with her hair. And anoints them with her ointment. This is a familiar story. But we should recognise how scandalous this is. This action. And even more so when performed by a known prostitute.

Has a distinctively erotic flavour to it. A woman letting down her hair in that society would clearly offend sexual propriety. On the surface of things. The scene seems shamelessly sexual.

[5 : 33] Simon seeing this. Thinks it must be proof that Jesus isn't a prophet. He is not acting as a righteous man. In tolerating such practice and contact. And he clearly lacks insight into the character of the woman.

Everyone else knows that she is a notorious sinner and prostitute. And this prophet. Seemed to be oblivious to the fact. Jesus recognises this. And speaks directly to Simon's thinking.

Showing that he can in fact. Understand the nature of human beings. Indeed that he has far greater perception. Than Simon might have attributed to him. He tells a story to Simon.

Inviting his judgement. A story of the cancellation of debts. And the cancellation of debts. This is a theme of the kingdom message. It's a model for understanding forgiveness. The extravagant cancellation of debts.

Is something that opens up the possibility of a new way of relating. A way driven by liberated love. Rather than by indebtedness. Forgiven a great debt.

[6 : 32] The released party is freed. To respond in love. However those who feel that they have been forgiven little. Can still implicitly operate in the framework of debt. And its bonds and obligations.

Jesus gets Simon to cast judgement on his question. And then he turns to the woman. To reveal the true nature of the situation. One that turns the picture that the reader of the passage has.

And that Simon might have. On his head. Simon. Who seemed like the grand and honourable host. Turns out to have been rather negligent. In his hospitality. As a guest of a good host.

Jesus might have expected water for his feet. A kiss of greeting. An anointing of his head with oil. Simon performed none of these acts of hospitality. However. The sinful woman performed the most extravagant acts of hospitality imaginable.

Performing far and above anything that Simon failed to perform. She goes to scandalous cultural extremes. And we really shouldn't miss this. She looses her hair. She touches Jesus.

[7 : 32] She anoints and kisses his feet. Actions which were far more sexually weighted than they are today. She weeps openly. No respectable woman would do any of these things. However.

She loves Jesus too much to behave in a restrained fashion. She also performs these actions on Jesus' feet. The most humble part of the body. Connected directly with the dust.

Honouring him in the very highest way that she can. Jesus here provides everyone with a very different way of looking at things. No longer does Simon appear as the honourable host.

And the woman as the sinful intruder. Performing an unseemly and sinful act. Compromising the supposed prophet. Now Simon appears to be the negligent host.

While the woman is the forgiven sinner. Extravagantly making up Simon's neglected acts of hospitality. Out of her profound love. She is covering his debt.

[8 : 26] While Jesus is the prophet who brings forgiveness and healing to those outside the camp of the righteous. In a way that shows up the unrecognised sins of the righteous themselves. Revealing how little they love.

Jesus declares that the woman is forgiven. And we should presume that Jesus has already interacted with her prior to this. As she seems to be responding to having been forgiven already. But Jesus' declaration of her forgiveness is not merely or primarily for her own sake.

Although it does reassure her. Rather it is for the sake of everyone else. She is being publicly affirmed as one of the righteous. The challenge now is for everyone else to recognise and affirm this.

We noted earlier sexual connotations of the woman's action. While Jesus' explanation challenges the interpretation that something inappropriate and sinful is occurring. And it becomes clear that this is extravagant hospitality and love rather than a sexual advance.

Her actions still have a somewhat sexual character. And it's hard to escape this. What are we to make of it? She behaves towards Jesus in a way that one could only ever really imagine a wife behaving towards a husband, for instance.

[9 : 37] She recognises in this that the bridegroom has come to the feast. Simon, who completely fails to honour Jesus, does not. She makes up for Simon's failures by treating Jesus in a way befitting the bridegroom of Israel.

We might here think of David's dancing before the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Samuel chapter 6 when it was brought into Jerusalem. The passage ends with the woman being commended for her faith.

What does faith mean in this context? We've seen elsewhere in the Gospels that it can involve persistent or pronounced confidence in Jesus' capacity and willingness to save.

In the case of the centurion, it's confidence in Christ's authority, his word. And here it seems to be these things, but also an extravagant act of hospitality, by which Jesus is received and recognised as the one that he truly is.

This is a woman who, perhaps hurt by the dishonour given to Jesus by a negligent host, makes up all that is lacking within his hospitality with her extravagant love.

[10 : 44] She acts towards him in a way that displays who he truly is, in an act of such intimate attachment and love that could only ever be proper within the context of marriage or in the context of a relationship with someone who delivered you from all of your sins.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which a form of behaviour arising out of love, flowing from the release of unpayable and unimaginable debt, differs from a form of behaviour based upon honour and what one owes to others?

