

A Portrait of Two Debtors

September 9th, 2012

Luke 7:36-50

⁴¹“A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.””

After a five-week break from the Gospel of Luke, this is a very good place to pick up in our study, because this text highlights something that is a very significant theme in Luke, something we've seen before and will see again: the idea that being a Christian isn't about being "religious". Repeatedly in this book, Jesus offends the morally scrupulous, Bible-believing, law-abiding, Jewish people (Pharisees) and receives the moral and social outcasts of society.

This started in before Jesus came on the scene, when John the Baptist told the religious leaders that they were a brood of vipers, and that they needed to repent or they would face the wrath to come. It continued in chapter 4, at the outset of Jesus' public ministry, when the synagogue-attenders in Nazareth try to throw Him off cliff for suggesting that the Gentiles are the ones He's come to heal. And on to chapter 5, where the Pharisees grumble at Him for dining with tax collectors and sinners.

And it will continue in chapter 10 (the Good Samaritan) and chapter 15 (the prodigal sons) and chapter 18 (the Pharisee and tax collector) and chapter 19 (Zacchaeus). In general, religiously observant people were offended by Jesus, but notorious "sinners" were attracted to, and were received by, Jesus. This truth is depicted most vividly when Jesus says to the Pharisees, ³¹“Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”

This story is a great illustration of that truth. It highlights the difference between the religious approach to Jesus and the "gospel" approach. The main take-away from this text is the contrasts between

Simon the Pharisee (a very religious person), and the nameless woman who was known for her sinful ways (a very immoral woman). So let's look at how these two differ in their approach to Jesus, and then consider what accounts for those differences.

Three Contrasts

We can identify at least three differences between Simon and the sinful woman, which expose some of the differences between a religious mindset and a Christian mindset. Let's start in verses 44-46, where Jesus draws attention to the differences between them:

"⁴⁴Then 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. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment."

Difference #1: Cool Detachment vs. Deep Passion

Notice, first, that Simon treats Jesus like just another person, while the sinful woman makes much of Jesus and relates to Him with great passion and affection. Simon hasn't been a wonderful host; he's neglected some of the common courtesies that were often given (not required) to guests. He's very "matter-of-fact" about Jesus' presence in his home. Clearly he's interested in Jesus in some ways -- he's invited Jesus into his home -- but there is a cool, detached, unfeeling, approach to Jesus. He's nobody special, marvelous, breathtaking, not worth pouring yourself out for, no deep "Oh!" in his heart.

This is common of religious people. They may acknowledge many facts about Jesus, they may inquire about Him, they may be interested in learning some things about Him. But, you know, let's not get too carried away with Him. A little faith/religion is good in your life, but all things in moderation. A religious person might have some level of

regard and respect for Jesus, but there's no (or very little) passion in their souls for Him. The sort of songs we're singing about Him make no sense, they don't resonate in the soul.

The woman, on the other hand, doesn't just give her intellect, but her whole being is engaged. She's weeping in His presence, she disregards all social customs to let her hair down and wipe His feet, she's indifferent to what other people think because only Jesus matters. I understand we're all emotionally constituted in different ways, but genuinely coming to Jesus affects the whole being. It's not about information, but about the soul's transformation in affection for Jesus.

Difference #2: Critical Observation vs. Humble Submission

Notice that Simon is in control of the whole encounter with Jesus, Simon is in the driver's seat, and Jesus must conform to his expectations in order to be acquitted in the court-room of Simon's thinking. I say that based on verse 39, "³⁹Now 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.'"

Simon has invited Jesus into his home, but it seems like Simon's posture is that of an employer, having Jesus in for an interview in order to determine whether Jesus is worthy of his honor and respect. The moment Jesus defies his expectations (by allowing this sinful woman to get near Him), he scoffs. He's in the seat of the judge, Jesus is on the dock, and He's just been found wanting. "If this man were a prophet..." That is how many religious people relate to God: do things my way, or else I want nothing to do with You. If You do not conform to my expectations, You are not worthy of my allegiance.

The woman is clearly not trying to hold on to control here. She's totally lost herself. She's opening herself to public scorn and reproach by coming to Jesus. She isn't coolly weighing her spiritual options.

She's committed to Jesus with her whole self. She's taken the most precious possession she has, the key to her livelihood, and pours it out literally at Jesus' feet. She totally gives herself to Him, without condition or qualification.

How do you relate to Jesus? Are you trying to set the terms of your relationship with Him, or have you totally surrendered yourself to Him?

Difference #3: Self-Righteousness vs. Self-Abasement

This is probably the most prominent characteristic of the religious person: the smug sense of superiority that he feels towards everyone who does not measure up to his standards of righteousness. ³⁹Now 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." He despises this woman; he is sickened by her. No prophet, no righteous person, would be caught dead associating with such a low-life as this wicked woman! He's totally inflated with pride, and he looks down upon both Jesus and the woman for not measuring up to his purity-standard.

The woman, on the other hand, has a much more sober assessment of herself. Everyone knows she's a notorious sinner. She knows she's unworthy to be in His presence; that's probably why she's crying. She doesn't even say a word in this whole interaction. She's taking the posture of a servant by washing and kissing His feet. She's clearly not all that impressed with herself. In fact, she's not thinking much of herself at all. She simply wants to be near Jesus and honor Him in a way that His host has not.

Simon thinks he's a pretty good person; the woman knows she's not. And Jesus delights in *her* affection! In contrasting these two people, let's not fail to marvel at the tender loving-kindness of Jesus here! This woman is pitifully precious to Jesus. The sinless One is the friend of sinners! Oh, the beauty of this Man! But marvel also, that Jesus is the

friend of Pharisees too. Jesus is not a Pharisee about Pharisees. He pursues them in love too. He's dining with him, He's engaging with this man, pleading with him, reasoning with him, all in hopes of persuading him to experience what this woman has experienced.

The Two Characters are Two Debtors

So here we have two people, in the same house, in the presence of the same Jesus, having (likely) heard the same stories about Him, and yet they respond to Jesus in two very different ways. Now what is it that accounts for these differences? After highlighting the differences between Simon and the woman, Jesus tells Simon what accounts for the stark contrast in these two people: "⁴⁷Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”"

The woman's behavior is the fruit of great love for Jesus. But where does this deep love come from? Jesus says the experience of forgiveness is the cause of that love. The point is not, "This woman will be forgiven because she loves much," but, "Clearly this woman has been forgiven much, and the evidence of that is her deep love." That is the point of the parable that Jesus tells about the two debtors:

"⁴¹ 'A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?' ⁴³Simon answered, 'The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.' And he said to him, 'You have judged rightly.'"

This isn't rocket science, but it's the key to loving Jesus deeply. Let me ask you this question: what do you owe God? You're familiar with getting a statement in the mail, with an accounting of your debts: credit card debt, housing debt, school loan debt, car payment debt, and you get a reckoning. What if God sent you that bill each month? What if God took an account of all your sin -- past, present, future -- all your

thought, word, deed, sin of commission and omission. What if God sent you a bill every month, what would you owe God? What would your debt be? What is your debt?

You know what your debt is? Not 50 denarii or 500 denarii, but your life. That's what you owe him because of your sin: "²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus is the great and glorious money lender who has come from heaven to earth to pay your debt. It can't just go out of existence; someone has to pay the debt. And on the cross, that is exactly what Jesus did:

"¹³And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

The more you understand the magnitude of your debt, the more you feel your inability to pay that debt, the more precious will you find the cancelling of that debt, and the more love you will have in your heart for the One who has paid that debt at the cost of His life. That is the point of this story. Paul Tripp sums it up well: "No one celebrates the presence and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ more than the person who has embraced his desperate and daily need of it." Or as Francis of Assisi wrote, "There is nowhere a more wretched and miserable sinner than I." Can you say that, from the heart?

Simon couldn't, and this woman could. That's why they responded so differently to Jesus, and that's why I'll never stop telling you about the ugliness of your sin, and about the beauty and preciousness of your Savior who has rescued from the penalty and power of sin. "He's the King of kings and Lord of Lords, and He shall reign forevermore, O the beauty of this Man! He gave His life at Calvary, and purchased mine to set me free, O the beauty of this Man!" Only when you get that deep down in your soul will you sing:

*Take my love, my Lord I pour
At Your feet it's treasure store
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.*